

A Decent Living: Making the Case for the Minimum Wage

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I had one experience in the campaign ...it was on that hectic ride from Providence to Boston. We got into New Bedford and in that park there was the most awful jam. There must have been 20,000 people where there was room for only about a thousand and they were jammed around my car. There was a girl about six or seven feet away who was trying to pass an envelope and she was just too far away to reach. One of the policemen threw her back into the crowd and I said to Gus, "Get the note from that girl." He got it, and handed it to me, and the note said this: "Dear Mr. President, I wish you could do something to help us girls. You are the only recourse we have left. We have been working in a sewing factory, a garment factory, and up to a few months ago we were getting our minimum pay of \$11 a week ... Today the 200 of us girls have been cut down to \$4 and \$5 and \$6 a week. You are the only man that can do anything about it. Please send somebody from Washington up here to restore our minimum wages, because we cannot live on \$4 or \$5 or \$6 a week."

Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, Vol. V, New York, Random House, 1936, 624.

1 Introduction

In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the National Recovery Act into law. Its sweeping provisions supplied part of the legal architecture for the system of public policies and programs that would become known as "The New Deal". One of its most radical mandates, powerfully advocated by Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, was for a federal minimum wage.¹

¹ The *National Recovery Act* and its minimum wage provision were found to be unconstitutional in 1935 (*Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States*) but the 'big switch', a significant change in the

Minimum wage policies govern the activity of employers: they establish a base hourly rate for employed labor, and require that workers be paid no less than this amount. They may, as such, be considered ‘a price floor,’ for they function to establish a level beneath which workers are not afforded opportunities to sell their labor. Minimum wage provisions impose constraints on the operation of market mechanisms that are otherwise said to regulate the price of labor.

At the time of its introduction, the American minimum wage was both conceived and justified as a *living wage*:

No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country. By “business” I mean the whole of commerce as well as the whole of industry; by workers I mean all workers, the white-collar class as well as the men in overalls; and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level—I mean the wages of decent living, (Roosevelt, 1933).

Following Roosevelt, we will understand “living wages” to be those required for one to make a decent living (something that we shall expand upon shortly), and for that to be the particular level to which a justifiable minimum wage is indexed. So, when we refer to the “Minimum Wage” in this paper, we have in mind policies that require employers to pay their employees a wage that can sustain a decent living.

This paper aims to defend the Minimum Wage against a *prima facie* powerful objection (henceforth: The Objection): roughly, that, while the institution of a Minimum Wage benefits some low-wage workers, it does so at the expense of the even less well-off. It’s not implausible to think that justifications for a policy like the Minimum Wage should be particularly attentive to the concerns of the least advantaged. If the policy harms the least advantaged, it must engender a *significant* amount of good elsewhere in order to render the policy justifiable. Although this is a contested empirical matter, The Objection avers that it’s highly unlikely that the Minimum Wage engenders enough good elsewhere to outweigh the harm it causes the least advantaged. And thus—The Objection concludes—we ought to reject the Minimum Wage.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we introduce and explore some of the possible consequences of the minimum wage. Then, building on this material, we spell out The Objection in greater detail, before proceeding to mount a defense of the Minimum Wage. We argue that The Objection under-appreciates both *how bad* it is to work for wages that fall below those constituting a living wage, and how

position of the Supreme Court on the minimum wage allowed the Roosevelt administration to reintroduce a minimum wage in 1938 via the *Fair Labor Standards Act* (Chambers, 1969)—and a federal minimum wage, and the legal instrument that reinstated it remains in effect to this day.

bad it is to live in a society in which such work is normalized; and, thus, that it mis-identifies who is, and who would be, the *least* advantaged by the institution of the Minimum Wage.

2 The Costs and Benefits of the Minimum Wage

Much of the debate surrounding the minimum wage has focused on its material effects—its consequences for the well-being of individuals. It is, of course, controversial whether a policy’s consequences are the *only* considerations relevant to the justification of its adoption. Consequentialists think that they are; Non-Consequentialists think they are not. But most Non-Consequentialists would nonetheless concede that the material consequences of a policy are *relevant* to whether that policy ought to be adopted. The argument against the minimum wage with which this paper is centrally concerned holds that the consequences of instituting a minimum wage are, when properly weighted, *worse* than not instituting one. It is this claim that we aim to question. We wish to remain neutral about whether a minimum wage ought nevertheless be adopted *even if* its material effects are, on net, negative.²

What then are the likely effects of the minimum wage? Experts disagree. For the sake of argument, though, let’s look at the consequences highlighted by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) in their 2019 report on raising the US federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour. The report identifies six species of likely consequences:³

- (1) *Benefit Low-Wage Workers.* The CBO estimates that increasing the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour would “increase the wages of 17 million workers whose wages would otherwise be below \$15 per hour” (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 1).
- (2) *Benefit Higher-Wage Workers.* The report estimates that the wages of “many of the 10 million workers whose wages would be slightly above the new federal minimum would also increase,” due to increased competition in the labor market (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 1).

² Wilkinson (2004) argues that the minimum wage should be evaluated using “a consequentialist criterion” and that “there are no important considerations besides jobs and incomes relevant to the assessment of the minimum wage,” (p. 372). He argues that non-consequentialist considerations—in particular, claims about exploitation and freedom—aren’t of the right kind to successfully justify the policy. Although we will ultimately disagree with Wilkinson that only “jobs and incomes” are relevant to evaluating the minimum wage, we’ll accept, for the sake of the argument, that the policy should only be assessed in terms of its consequences.

³ This partial list certainly doesn’t exhaust all the potential consequences relevant to assessing the policy—we should also look at a policy’s effect on health outcomes, education, crime, and so on. But it will suffice for our purposes.

- (3) *Reduce Income to Businesses.* Raising the minimum wage increases the cost of labor to employers. Businesses that employ low-wage workers will likely see a reduction in profit (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 2). This predominantly affects higher-earning families.
- (4) *Increase Prices.* Raising the minimum wage increases the cost of labor to employers. This cost will be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 2). Because they have the money to purchase more goods, this will predominantly affect higher-earning families.
- (5) *Reduces the Nation's Overall Output.* Increasing the cost of employing low-wage workers reduces the productivity of capital goods (e.g., machines, buildings, equipment), which decreases future investment into such goods (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 11). This will predominantly affect higher-earning families.
- (6) *Increase Unemployment (Especially Among Low-Wage Workers).* The CBO estimates that, by 2025, “1.3 million workers who would otherwise be employed would be jobless” (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 2). This predominantly affects low-wage workers (p. 9).

All in all, the CBO estimates that raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour “would reduce total real (inflation-adjusted) family income in 2025 by \$9 billion,” (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 2). Some might argue that, because the policy would result in a reduction of total real family income, its overall consequences are negative, and, hence, that it should not be adopted. That would be too quick. As the list makes plain, the proposed policy affects different groups of people—e.g., low-wage workers, high-income families, business owners, etc.—differently. Whether the policy’s effects are negative *overall* depend on how these various benefits and harms are to be weighed off against each other.

Do the benefits outweigh the costs? It depends on both empirical and normative considerations. For example, although the report estimates the changes in income that might befall different groups of individuals, we’d ideally like to know how and to what extent these changes affect those individuals’ *well-being*. Presumably, being paid a higher wage makes one better off. But *how much* better? Similarly, losing income—either due to unemployment, reduced profits if you’re a business owner, or to rising prices of consumer goods—presumably makes one worse off. But *how much* worse? These questions are, at least in part, an empirical matter. But even granting an answer to these questions, there is still the issue of how to *weigh off* the increases in well-being to some against the decreases to others. How these costs and benefits are *distributed* might very well matter. Redis-

tributing a unit of well-being from someone at the top to someone at the bottom is plausibly better than redistributing things in the other direction.

Before moving to the next section, it will be helpful to unpack (6)—as it will play a prominent role in what follows. Why think that the minimum wage would lead to an increase in unemployment? And who is it likely to impact?

According to textbook economic theory, instituting a minimum wage will result in an increase in unemployment.⁴ And on this front, the CBO assessment is in accord.⁵ How large the increase in unemployment will be depends, at least in part, on how high the minimum wage is set. For modest increases in the minimum wage, there will likely be negligible effects on the unemployment rate. Even those working within classical theoretical models recognize that demand for labor is standardly fairly inelastic, and so many of the costs of imposing a price floor on labor are likely to be absorbed by employers. Nonetheless, extreme increases in the minimum wage—raising it to well above the current median wage, for example—would likely lead to disastrous levels of unemployment.⁶

The exact relationship between unemployment and the minimum wage remains hotly contested.⁷ However, while the empirical evidence might be mixed,

⁴ The thought is that, in general, price floors lead to oversupply. Assuming that the competitive price for a widget is lower than $\$x$, if we disallow paying that lower amount, there will be people who, while happy to pay the lower price, aren't willing to spend $\$x$ for one; and demand for widgets will drop. Assuming again that the competitive rate is lower than $\$x$, suppliers will be more than happy to sell their widgets for $\$x$. And so, at the price of $\$x$ per widget, the supply will outrun demand; there will be widgets that sellers wish to sell but that no buyers are willing to buy. When the "widget" is labor, oversupply is unemployment.

⁵ It identifies two different mechanisms by which the minimum wage can contribute to greater unemployment. First, because the minimum wage increases the cost to employers of producing goods and services, we should expect some of these costs to be passed along to consumers in the form of higher prices. At those higher prices, we should expect consumers to consume less. In response, producers will produce less, resulting in a decrease in demand for labor. The CBO notes that, via this mechanism, the minimum wage could cause an increase in unemployment among both low-wage as well as high-wage workers (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 9). The second mechanism identified in the CBO report, however, pertains to low-wage workers in particular. The minimum wage increases the cost of employing low-wage workers, thus lowering the relative cost of employing high-wage workers or investing in automation or other technologies. We should expect, then, for some employers to shift to these substitutes instead of continuing to employ low-wage workers at their previous levels (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2019, p. 9). In both cases, it is low-wage workers who are most vulnerable to unemployment.

⁶ See, for example, the effects of imposing the US federal minimum wage on Puerto Rico during the 1980s (Castillo-Freeman and Freeman, 1992).

⁷ The empirical evidence regarding the relationship between unemployment and the minimum wage is mixed. Card and Krueger (1995) studied the effect of the minimum wage on unemployment in the fast food industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and concluded that increases in the minimum wage did not result in greater unemployment. Their evidence has been disputed, however (see, e.g., Bazen, 2000). Subsequently, Neumark and Wascher (2007) found some disemployment effects in their 2007 review of past studies. This literature is so vexed, however, that there isn't even consensus in the literature about what the research says (Neumark and Shirley,

it's not implausible to think that, at least for moderate increases in the minimum wage, the effect on unemployment is real: some, who wouldn't otherwise lack a job, will end up without one.⁸ Even if this isn't true, let's grant it for the sake of argument. Let's also grant, again for the sake of argument, that ensuring a living wage would constitute a *moderate*—rather than a minor or an extreme—increase in the minimum wage.

Increased unemployment—alongside a reduction in the nation's overall output, increases in prices, and a reduction in business income—is a serious cost. Raising the minimum wage, of course, also has its benefits. As previously mentioned, it's not obvious whether the benefits outweigh the costs or *vice versa*. The next section will present an argument that they do not.

3 The Progressive Objection to the Minimum Wage

As we saw in the previous section, the minimum wage benefits some at the expense of others. Whether its effects are good or bad *overall* depend, then, on the comparative magnitude of these costs and benefits as well as on how these costs and benefits should be weighed against each other.

In terms of costs, the CBO study identified four (3-6): reduced income for businesses, increased prices, a reduction in the nation's overall output, and an increase in unemployment. In terms of benefits, the study identified two (1-2): increased wages for both low-wage and higher-wage workers. Setting the issue of unemployment to the side for a moment, on the CBO analysis, the costs of instituting a minimum wage are predominantly borne by those who are better off, while the benefits accrue to those who are less well off.

This is unsurprising, of course, given the nature of the policy. For proponents of the minimum wage, attending to the welfare of the least advantaged is precisely what we ought to be doing (Wilkinson, 2004). There are several normative justifications for this position. Egalitarians will be unperturbed with a policy that makes the better-off somewhat worse off in order to make the worse-off somewhat better off, for such a policy thereby conduces to a more equal distribution of welfare. Prioritarians (e.g., Parfit, 1997), who weigh the welfare of the less well-off more heavily than the welfare of the better-off, are likely to be unperturbed as well. Even Utilitarians, so long as they accept the marginal decreasing value of money,

2021).

⁸ This claim requires some clarification. If the labor market fails to be competitive, the textbook analysis needn't hold. In fact, instituting a Minimum Wage might even *decrease* unemployment if there is a monopsony (Robinson, 1932). A monopsony—a single buyer of, in this case, labor—can offer wages well below what they would be in a competitive market. (Similarly, a monopoly can sell widgets at prices well above what they would be in a competitive market.) Assume, not unreasonably, that we aren't in such a situation. (See West and McKee, 1980, for more discussion).

would agree that it's better for a policy to benefit the less well-off at the expense of the better-off than *vice versa*.

Progressivism

In evaluating the overall moral value of a state-of-affairs, the interests of the less-advantaged are (typically) more important than the interests of the better-advantaged.

Prioritarianism is an example of *Progressivism par excellence*. The most extreme form of Prioritarianism—the Rawlsian MaxiMin view—holds that all that matters is how the policy affects those who are the least well-off. Given suitable background conditions, Egalitarianism and Utilitarianism are also *Progressive*.

Regressivism

In evaluating the overall moral value of a state-of-affairs, the interests of the better-advantaged are (typically) more important than the interests of the less-advantaged.

On the other hand, it's hard to see how *Regressive* views—of which it's much harder to think of any plausible examples—could justify a policy like the minimum wage (at least assuming that the estimates of [U.S. Congressional Budget Office \(2019\)](#) are on the right track). The minimum wage is a progressive policy requiring, if not a *Progressive* justification, a non-*Regressive* one. *Progressive* views are vastly more plausible than *Regressive* views.

This leads us to The Objection against the minimum wage. On the one hand, as just suggested, if it's right that the minimum wage imposes significant enough costs on those who are better-off, it looks as if the policy requires a (reasonably) *Progressive* justification. On the other hand, because of the minimum wage's effect on unemployment, it's not clear that it can be given a *Progressive* justification. Here's why.

Consider the way things would be without the minimum wage. For simplicity, let's also partition everyone into two groups: the Better-off and the Worse-off. The members of the Better-off are, as their name suggests, doing well. Among the Worse-off, a small number are unemployed and the rest are low-wage workers. Now, consider the way things would be if we were to adopt a minimum wage. Let's focus on three effects. First, the Better-off are made worse off for the reasons mentioned above: the reduction in business income, the increase in prices, and the reduction in the nation's overall output. Second, a sizable subset of the subset of the Worse-off who would be otherwise employed (albeit at a low wage) are made better off in virtue of earning a higher wage. Lastly, a smaller subset of the subset of the Worse-off who would be otherwise employed are made even worse off in virtue of being unemployed.

	Worse-off	Better-off
<i>No Minimum Wage</i>	Employed at low-wages	status quo
<i>Minimum Wage</i>	Unemployed	Employed at higher-wages — costs

Figure 1: The effects of the Minimum Wage on the Worse-off and the Better-off

It's not clear that *Progressive* views, which instruct us to weigh more heavily the interests of the less-advantaged over those of the better-advantaged, regard the world with the minimum wage as better than the world without. The worst-off members of the Worse-off are worse off under *Minimum Wage* than under *No Minimum Wage*: they are unemployed, rather than employed at a low-wage. Although less relevant to *Progressive* views, the members of the Better-off are also worse off under *Minimum Wage* than under *No Minimum Wage*. The only ones who are better off under *Minimum Wage* are the better-off members of the Worse-off: those who remain employed and who are now earning more. Which of the two states-of-affairs is better will, of course, depend on the details—e.g., how large are each of these respective groups, to what extent are their members made better or worse off, how extreme is one's version of *Progressivism*, etc.⁹ But for a wide range of reasonably realistic ways of filling in these details, not even *Progressive* views support the minimum wage.

That's The Objection. What motivates the minimum wage is a concern for the worst-off. But, given the minimum wage's effect on unemployment, true concern for the worst-off actually seems to tell against it. The policy is difficult to support even on the progressive grounds which should seem most favorable to it.¹⁰

Note that The Objection relies on the claim that it is worse to be unemployed than to be employed-at-below-a-minimum-wage. In the next section, we argue that this is not, in general, true. For reasons of dignity and self-respect, it can actually be worse to be a low-wage worker than to be unemployed—at least when there are other social provisions (e.g., unemployment insurance) on offer to attenuate the badness of joblessness. We claim that it can often be worse in other, more

⁹ In its most extreme form—a Rawlsianesque view, which puts all of the moral weight on those who are worst off—these other details will be less relevant to *Progressivism's* verdict. Assuming that it's worse to be unemployed than to be a sub-minimum wage worker (an assumption we challenge in the next section), those who would be worst off were the minimum wage to be implemented—the unemployed—are worse off than those who would be worst off—the low-wage workers—if it wasn't. (Actually, given that there will be some unemployment in both scenarios, a strict MaxiMin view would rank them as equally bad. The LexiMin version of the view, however, would regard the scenario in which a minimum wage is implemented as worse.)

¹⁰ This is, roughly, the position argued for in Wilkinson (2004): “[T]here are roughly two views of the minimum wage. One is that it harms the position of the worst off and the other is that it does neither much harm nor much good. ... [T]he conclusion seems to be this: At worst, the minimum wage is a mistake, and, at best, it is something to be half-hearted about ...” (p. 372).

prosaic ways as well. So, even granting The Objection's Welfarist assumption—namely, that the minimum wage's effects on individuals' welfare are the only morally relevant considerations—it's not so clear that it establishes what it sets out to. Moreover, we suggest that sometimes, individual welfare is not all that matters. Other things matter too: including the existence of exploitative, power-imbalanced relationships, and the degradation of civic life. A world in which these things obtain is, all else equal, worse than one in which they don't. All else rarely ever is equal, but nevertheless, if these things also matter, they likewise support the implementation of a minimum wage.

4 Is It Worse to be Unemployed?

The argument in the previous section—the one we're contesting—went like this: we ought to implement a minimum wage only if doing so would be, on balance, better than not. Whether implementing a minimum wage would be, on balance, better than not doing so heavily depends on how the minimum wage would affect the well-being of those who are worst-off. Granting the standard economic view, implementing a (moderate) minimum wage would increase unemployment. It is worse to be unemployed than to be paid a sub-minimum wage (at least assuming, as we shall grant for the sake of argument, that the income from unemployment insurance is smaller). And so, the minimum wage actually makes the situation of the worst-off worse—by adding to their number—rather than better. The policy harms many of those it attempts to help. And so—the argument concludes—it's likely not a policy we should adopt.

In the upcoming sections, we contest The Objection on two fronts. First, we cast doubt on the claim that it is worse to be unemployed than to be employed at a sub-minimum wage level. If it's not worse to be unemployed, then The Objection fails to establish that the minimum wage would be worse for the worst-off and thus hard to defend on progressive grounds. Second, we argue that it is worse for *all of us* to live in a society in which certain social relationships prevail—ones that exhibit extremely asymmetric relations of power, that are objectionably exploitative, and that undermine important democratic ideals and practices.

Before we proceed, it may be helpful to say a little more about how we conceive the Minimum Wage. Recall that, following Roosevelt, we have opted to index a justifiable minimum wage to a living wage—a wage that affords a worker a *decent living*. On our account, this means a wage that not only secures the worker against absolute poverty, but against certain forms of relative poverty—namely, against life at a level of income that would not standardly allow the worker to pursue *normal projects of their own*, such as basic leisure activities, meaningful personal hobbies, and standard forms of civic engagement. We take the power to enable basic

leisure activities, meaningful personal hobbies, and civic engagement as distinctive of the decent living wage: the Minimum Wage must be sufficient to secure an agent's economic capacity to undertake and pursue such *normal projects of their own*.¹¹

In conceiving the Minimum Wage in these terms, we posit an ideal threshold to be determined by consulting prevailing social norms about what can and should constitute a normal range of projects during non-work time and leisure.¹² These norms may be aspirational.¹³

It is also worth noting, before we move on, that this conception of the Minimum Wage is conditioned by a further important expectation: that of the limited working week. The agent must have *time* outside of work for the pursuit of *normal projects of their own*. The social guarantee of a Minimum Wage that we wish to defend both implies, and presupposes, the social guarantee of a limited working week.

4.1 Jobs Not Worth Having

It can be, and often is, worse to earn less than the Minimum Wage than it is to be unemployed. This is so, we argue, *even if* the unemployed receive less net income than those who make less than the minimum wage, and *even if* they would *prefer* working to not. This isn't to say that work isn't important, or that unemployment isn't a serious problem. It is. But we shouldn't let the significance of work mislead us into thinking that *any* work is better than no work at all.

As we shall argue, it is worse to earn less than the Minimum Wage because it involves standing in a social relationship to one's employer and to fellow citizens which functions to compromise dignity, to corrode self-respect, and to impair social standing and democratic participation. But there are other, more prosaic reasons as well: although there's robust empirical evidence that unemployment is negatively related to life satisfaction, there is also empirical evidence that the unemployed experience, on average, more enjoyment than the employed (Hoang and Knabe, 2021), and are physically (Chandola and Zhang, 2018) and mentally (Butterworth et al., 2011) healthier than those employed in poor quality work.

¹¹ Although note that it need only preserve the capacity, and that the employee need not elect to invest their wages or time thus.

¹² As such, the actual amount that the Minimum Wage comes to in a given social context may not coincide with amounts determined by other extant 'living wage' measures (like the MIT living wage calculator) that expressly exclude expenses such as those incurred by standard leisure activities or budgeting limited savings for the future.

¹³ Thus, just because no-one in living and working in Ohio presently has the time or means to go to the cinema once a month, does not preclude 'having the means to afford a monthly movie trip' forming part of a normal conception of a decent living for the purpose of establishing a Ohioan Minimum Wage.

Some jobs are worse—in terms of happiness and health—than no job at all.¹⁴ Happiness and health aren't the *only* factors relevant to one's well-being, but they are surely major factors. It's bad to be unemployed, but not when the nearby alternatives are worse. And it might very well be the case that, absent the Minimum Wage, the nearby alternatives—at least for some—really are worse.

Setting aside happiness and health, there are other reasons, which concern the worker's dignity and self-respect, to think that unemployment needn't be worse than working for less than a decent amount. Our central claim in what follows is that paying an employee less than a Minimum Wage is disrespectful.¹⁵ Because employer/employee relationships typically persist for a non-trivial amount of time, this disrespect becomes a standing feature of the relationship. Moreover, work often plays an important role in one's life—at the least, it structures how one spends much of their time; at the most, it is a defining source of one's identity. It is bad for you—but also, to some extent, for us all—to be encapsulated in a long-standing relationship of disrespect. This is an assault on your dignity. If dignity and self-respect contribute to one's well-being, as we think they do, then being paid less than a decent wage makes one worse off. If dignity and self-respect are *major* contributors to well-being, which is something we also think, then, in many cases, it will be better to be unemployed than to suffer the indignity of being paid peanuts.

But why think that being paid less than a decent wage is disrespectful? For some, this might seem like a question hardly worth asking—it just clearly is *disrespectful*. But we think that more can be said to the end of illumination and motivation.¹⁶

Disrespectful Wages

Paying someone less than a living wage is disrespectful.

We'll do two things to motivate Disrespectful Wages. First, we will test intuitions against a series of cases, which help to clarify the ways in which disrespect can figure in wage-paying relationships. Second, and along the way, we'll sketch a

¹⁴ That's, of course, not to say that all jobs that pay below the minimum wage count as “poor quality work”. This literature contains various accounts of what it is for a job to be “poor quality”, but they all highlight low job pay alongside several psychosocial factors (e.g., autonomy, strain, insecurity, etc.). Although not all poorly paying jobs are “poor quality”, surely some of them are. And this research suggests that working those jobs might actually be worse than being unemployed.

¹⁵ As will become clear, the claim is *not* that paying an employee less than a decent wage is *inherently* disrespectful. There might be, and likely are, exceptions.

¹⁶ We are not alone in this regard. Dobos (2019) argues that, when full-time workers are paid below-subsistence, they are *demeaned*. His argument appeals to the *expressive power* of the wage: rightly or wrongly, we often draw inferences from the size of our wage to the value of our work, and from the value of our work to our worth as people. Low-wages, then, can be insulting—even if they aren't intended to be. We offer a compatible but different account.

picture of what disrespect is, and argue that the failure to pay a Minimum Wage fits the bill. Let's begin.

Weekend Work. Bill is Peter's boss. Peter's contract requires him to work 40 hours per week and, in return, he earns a decent wage. By design, the contract does not specify which hours of the day Peter is meant to work. Peter's schedule could be decided well in advance, but Bill isn't organized and often decides scheduled shifts at the last minute. He often requires Peter to work on weekends. Because of all the chaos, it's very difficult for Peter to make any plans outside of work. His fishing buddies stopped inviting him to their outings.

Bill behaves disrespectfully towards Peter. By failing to communicate the shift schedule in advance, he fails to respect Peter's time outside of work and undermines Peter's capacity to pursue normal projects of his own. In order for Peter to adequately fulfill the terms of his contract, he must show up to work when he is supposed to. But because he has little advance warning of when he is supposed to work, he is unable to make free and full use of his time outside of work. Making free and full use of one's time outside of work typically requires prior planning. Bill's disregard for Peter's time outside of work—time which is essential for Peter to pursue his personal—is a form of disrespect.

Sub-subsistence Wage. Maren is Jacinta's boss. Jacinta's contract requires her to work 40 hours a week, but her wage is very low. It does not cover the price of Jacinta's (below-market) rent. Jacinta spends her entire salary on rent, and then has to take loans to make up the deficit and to cover her other basic expenses—including the cost of transport to work. Jacinta is rapidly acquiring debt. Realizing that her living situation is becoming precarious, she takes a second 40-hour job to make ends meet. That job pays a decent wage. But working for Maren has left Jacinta in so much debt that she can't afford to live without working both jobs.

Maren behaves disrespectfully towards Jacinta. By paying Jacinta sub-subsistence wages, she fails to respect Jacinta's time outside of work. The wages that Maren is paying for a full working week cannot sustain a typical worker—to survive, her employees take on further jobs and lose the time necessary for their enjoyment of normal projects outside of work. All of Jacinta's waking hours are consumed by work. She, like Peter, has no time for normal projects of her own.

Subsistence Wage. Giacomo is Hien's boss. Hien's contract requires her to work 40 hours a week. Giacomo pays Hien a subsistence wage.

It is perfectly calibrated to provide for Hien's basic needs: food, transport, utilities, and rent. There is no fat. Giacomo deploras fat. Hien does not need to work an extra job to survive, and her time outside of work is her own. Nonetheless, Hien's weekends are a spartan affair. She never goes to the movies, never eats out or entertains, and she spends her hours off taking walks and interacting only with people within walking range of her house. She would love to visit her mother, but her mother lives in the next town, out of walking range.

Giacomo behaves disrespectfully towards Hien. By paying Hien a subsistence wage, rather than a decent living wage, he fails to respect her time outside of work. Hien's choices in her time outside of work are drastically limited by material circumstance—well beyond the norm of her community. The sorts of personal projects that members of her community standardly value, like visiting one's parents, require certain financial means. The way that people standardly acquire these means is through work. But Hien works the standard work week, and does not come by the means to pursue normal projects of her own. Each month she spends the entirety of her paycheck on subsisting.

By contrast with previous cases, Hien's opportunities to pursue her personal projects are not being actively frustrated by her employer, but Giacomo is failing, nonetheless, to be even minimally supportive of her capacity for personal projects. Here, it might be objected that merely *failing to support* someone in their endeavors needn't be understood as disrespectful. And while that may be true in general (and perhaps especially true among strangers), Hien and Giacomo aren't strangers: they stand in a special relationship of socioeconomic dependence. Relationships like these plausibly ground certain expectations which go beyond merely *avoiding* the frustration of one's projects and are, instead, generative of positive duties to be at least minimally supportive. Because the two stand in such a relationship, by failing to be even minimally supportive, we contend that Giacomo behaves disrespectfully.

Indeed, on closer examination, we see that not only is Giacomo failing to be minimally supportive, but that Hien's case is more like the previous examples than might be initially thought, given practical realities concerning planning and risk. Hien can't undertake any type of project that requires economic support. This limits the range of things she can do in her spare time. But she is also limited in the temporal scope of the sorts of projects she can undertake. Because she lives paycheck to paycheck, she exists in a state of precarity: she cannot save, and she cannot engage in any forward financial planning for contingencies and risk. But, as we saw with Peter, being an agent with one's own projects involves forward planning and guarding against potential risks. Indeed, we may observe that Hien's precarity is a fairly serious liability—she is always on the cusp of falling into a

situation like Maren's where even the limited possibilities of a life outside of work will fall away. If Hien gets sick, or has to take unpaid leave, she will soon find herself in debt, and her subsistence wage will be inadequate for her subsistence.

The cases above illustrate the claim that respecting a person involves taking, if not their personal projects themselves, their opportunities to have normal personal projects, seriously. They illustrate (1) that taking a worker's dignity seriously requires not actively frustrating their basic potential to enjoy those opportunities. More ambitiously, they show that (2) standing in a relationship of full-time employment to someone can involve duties to be *minimally supportive* of their potential to have such opportunities. This is because the full-time employment relationship is a privileged relationship, that, in virtue of the time and opportunity costs involved, standardly conditions the worker's capacity to enjoy and pursue personal projects in time outside of work. A wage that fails to minimally support a worker's capacity to enjoy a decent life, with projects of their own, functions to undermine the exercise of that capacity in material respects. Whether or not an employer intends a given wage to show disrespect to a worker, the sub-minimum wage functions as a practical and expressive assault on the dignity of the worker—on their basic entitlement to a life outside of work and to normal personal projects.

It is bad for an agent to be treated disrespectfully. It is bad from the standpoint of individual well-being, in a way that cannot always be compensated for by income. And so, given certain background assumptions, it can be worse to be employed at below Minimum Wage than it is to be unemployed (so long as there is adequate social provision, etc.). People who are unemployed need not stand in employment relationships of ongoing disrespect. Moreover, in a society where the Minimum Wage is mandatory, people who are unemployed have one less reason to fear acquiring such a relationship were they to come into employment. This last observation bears on our final set of considerations, which have to do with creating healthy societal conditions for civic engagement and respectful public relationships.

4.2 The Common Weal, Civic Life

The Progressive Objection to the Minimum Wage made a Welfarist assumption—that how good a state-of-affairs is overall supervenes on facts about individuals' welfare, and our argument above responds in that vein. But other things might, and plausibly do, matter too.

The employer/employee relationship is one of the mainstays of the public realm; in developed economies, it stands out as one of the most basic and ubiquitous public relationships. Most people will stand in this relationship at some point in their life, and it will condition their disposition of the rest of their life, in-

cluding of their own projects and time. The ubiquity, significance and reach of the employer/employee relationship in civic life makes its general conduct a matter of public political and moral concern. Where an employer pays an agent less than a decent wage for a standard working week, they engender a relationship that is not merely asymmetrical, but arguably, abusive: by failing to provide a necessary form of support, a form of support that such relationships *should* entail the employer undermines the employee's capacity for a life outside of work and projects of their own—a capacity whose potential exercise the employer should support as a matter of recognizing the dignity of their employee. Under such circumstances, disrespect is a structural feature of the relationship. Whether or not the employee appreciates or is personally harmed by this fact, there can be a social interest in preventing the emergence of such relationships—just as there may be a social interest in creating conditions that prevent the emergence of other sorts of abusive relationship (irrespective of the individual preferences of those who might participate in such relationships). Imposing a minimum wage mandate can be seen not just as a gesture in the direction of the individual weal, but as a statement of norms concerning the proper conduct of power relations that are both materially and formally constitutive of public life—a statement of norms necessary to our collective well-being.

The payment of sub-minimum wages can impact our well-being as a collectivity in other ways as well. Where an employer disrespects an employee and frustrates their capacity to pursue projects of their own by paying them a sub-minimum wage for a standard working week, there are likely to be civic consequences. After all, in modern market democracies, civic engagement is the sort of thing that we tend to pursue off the clock, in our own time. If a worker like Hien lacks the means to visit her mother or plan for her future, we might reasonably worry about the extent to which she will be able to engage in the governance of her community as well. By paying a mere subsistence wage, her employer compromises Hien's likely capacity for civic engagement, and the rest of us can justifiably be concerned about losing the benefit of Hien's potential in this regard.

These worries concerning the common weal appeal to features that don't straightforwardly supervene on facts about any individual person's well-being. They suggest considerations that support mandating the minimum wage *even if* less well-off individuals would not be materially impacted (whether for good or ill) by such a mandate. Because even if the lack of a minimum wage doesn't affect the individual welfare of agents of particular concern, a world in which abusive labor relations hold between people and are normalized (noting here, the particularly public status of employment relations), is arguably worse than a world in which they don't.

5 Conclusion

Following a Neo-Rooseveltian line—which construes the minimum wage as a bulwark against indecent living conditions—we’ve argued that even if instituting a minimum wage would result in increased unemployment this does not of itself establish a Welfarist argument against the minimum wage. Moreover, we’ve gestured at social considerations that are often neglected in the traditional economic and public policy literature on the minimum wage, and that militate in favor of a renewed evaluation of the case for and against the minimum wage.

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