



### Join the Conversation

This is one part of a series. Look for all our basic income modules and other resources at [basicincomecanada.org](http://basicincomecanada.org)

## MORALS, VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

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Public policy reflects moral choices about what is right or wrong and what is valued. This module looks at the values underlying a basic income and how they can guide policy decisions.

### The Moral Concept of Basic Income

Some people think basic income is a new, radical idea. Some have called it an old idea that should be forgotten. In fact, it has been around for centuries and that's because it has enduring relevance, like the concept of democracy, which has also taken shape in different ways across time and place.

The concept of a basic income -- enabling people to meet their basic needs and live with dignity regardless of work status -- has been put forward by moral philosophers, theologians, economists, and many others. Thomas More wrote in *Utopia* in 1516 about the moral problem of poverty and the killing of thieves, explaining that,

“No penalty on earth will stop people from stealing, if it is their only way of getting food. It would be far more to the point to provide everyone with some means of livelihood.”

Another early example comes from Thomas

Paine's 1797 *Agrarian Justice*. He proposed that every American man and woman be provided 15 pounds upon reaching the age of 21, as a basic income paid for by a land inheritance tax. He reasoned this would foster the economic independence crucial to democracy.

### Shared Values

Values of human dignity, freedom, justice, fairness, and the common good are frequent threads woven through historical and current writing on basic income.

Today, interest in basic income is growing in large part due to widespread concern about the impact of technology on employment and extreme inequalities.

Some people identify basic income with Milton Friedman and find that worrying, with good reason. His proposal in the 1960s was miserly. He was also anti-government and he advanced theories of the 'rational self-interested man' and the invisible hand of the market that took most of the things humans truly value out of the equation. The dominance of these theories in public policy in the past few decades has driven inequality to extremes so if he were the only advocate of a basic income, we should indeed worry--but he is not.

Many economists -- along with people from other academic fields and all walks of life -- argue for a basic income precisely because it is based on human values and on reality instead of flawed theory or ideology. Some, like Robert Reich in *Saving Capitalism For the Many Not the Few*, find that the concept of basic income to better share wealth is the key to survival of an economy that is on a dangerous path where the robots' owners and their heirs will take all.

To succeed, we must turn morals and values into good public policy.

### **Policy Principles**

Policy and decision makers may not readily appreciate the importance of values in a basic income design. They are also faced with competing priorities, even when values are shared. How do we address these issues?

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

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Fairness really does matter to people. When several hundred Canadians were asked by behavioural economist Richard Thaler what they thought about a business that jacked up the price of snow shovels the morning after a blizzard, the answers were interesting. The 'rational man' theory doesn't just predict a price hike, it says the price should be raised to make sure the people who want the shovels the most (shown by willingness to pay a high price) get them. Except that 82% of people thought this was unfair. Unfairness like this, according to Thaler, tends to 'piss people off'.

First, by translating shared values into a set of principles that are in some way measurable we establish a policy framework and a way to evaluate options. For example, people are treated with dignity if they are free from intrusion and rules that don't apply to other people. We can count rules. We can also measure income adequacy and improvements towards equality.

BICN's guiding principles include universality, non-conditionality, security, autonomy, dignity, and economic and gender equality. Then, because human brains and beliefs can play tricks on us, we use a range of evidence to help decide what's best. The evidence includes results from pilots and programs and cost of poverty and labour market studies. But there have also been incredible advances in scientific understanding about what motivates us as human beings, what keeps us healthy, what makes us sick and what fosters cooperation or conflict. The resources at our disposal come from: psychology; feminism; behavioural economics; medicine; history; neuroscience; moral philosophy; statistics that go beyond GDP to better capture human wellbeing; and more.

A well-designed basic income that adds to human wellbeing, based on shared values and evidence of what works, is a game changer and our future may very well depend on it.