

## THE POWER OF OCCLUSION

Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. It is better to have a variety of models and archetypes so we stay flexible and open.

Kenneth Burke

There is no such thing as society

Margaret Thatcher

### Category Mistakes

To not be right is one thing, but to be told that what one says or believes is ‘not even wrong’<sup>1</sup> is an even harder pill to swallow. It implies that rather than having slipped up in some more or less superficial way, perhaps deducing an argument from premises about which one should exercise more caution, one has instead failed to grasp something of fundamental substantive importance. One has ended up trafficking in nonsense despite oneself. But how is it decided what is to count as nonsense rather than what is to count as ‘merely’ wrong?

On certain things it seems as if nature or, more generally, the world ‘as it is’ decides. For instance, in Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, when the enormous supercomputer Deep Thought is asked for the “answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything”, he

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase generally attributed to the physicist Wolfgang Pauli.

replies, after a period of 7.5 million years, “42”.<sup>2</sup> Whatever answer *might* have been given – submission to God, joining an anarchist commune, committing oneself to procuring the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people – the naming of an integer is entirely meaningless. The very subject of the question prevents such a response from being intelligible –except as such a *lack* of intelligibility becomes intelligible as comedy. Gilbert Ryle gave form to this kind of mistake by labelling it a “category mistake”.<sup>3</sup> Such mistakes are those made “by people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar, but are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong”.<sup>4</sup> The examples Ryle gives to flesh out his argument have a similar flavour to the answer the *Hitchhiker’s* supercomputer gives. In other words, they are just, unquestionably, wrong.

Ryle begins with a foreigner visiting Oxford who, after being shown a number of colleges, libraries and playing fields, etc., asks “but where is the University?” He is then told that the university is not another ‘collateral institution’; it is just a term used to describe the way in which all that he has already seen is organised. Another example is cricket. Another foreigner is invited/subjected to a game of cricket. He learns the functions of the various

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Adams. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. (London: William Heinemann, 1995) 198.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Ryle. *The Concept of Mind*. (London: Routledge, 2009 [1949]). 6 – 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 7

players and officials: the bowlers, batsmen, the fielders, the umpires and the scorers. The foreigner then asks ‘who is responsible for team-spirit?’ Again, he has been caught looking for the wrong type of thing. Team-spirit is not some supplementary cricketing-operation but, roughly, the keenness with which each of the relevant cricketing-tasks is performed. It is a description of the enthusiasm with which various functions are carried out.

These mistakes then are being made “by people who did not know how to wield the concepts *University* and ...*team-spirit*.” Their puzzles arose from the inability to use certain items in the English vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> But these problems are easily correctable. The university visitor and the tyro cricket spectator can be very quickly disabused of their mistaken views. Indeed, little more than the paragraph above would likely suffice. It is not as if people unfamiliar with universities or cricket can retort that their misunderstandings have been misunderstood, that they are merely approaching the subject from a different perspective which has its own value and truth content. Such an assertion would be to compound an innocent mistake with a bizarre kind of arrogance. The visitor, once told of his or her mistake the mistake is, barring pathological stubbornness, corrected.

However, these kinds of category mistake provide only a sliver of the whole story. In order to move beyond that sliver, we leave Ryle’s own project,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

which was to correct the profound category mistake he argues has grounded the philosophy of mind since Descartes, and instead turn toward Friedrich Hayek's use of the notion of a category mistake. Hayek suggests that "to apply the term 'just' to circumstances other than human actions or the rules governing them is a category mistake".<sup>6</sup> Uncontroversially, he goes on to suggest that "Nature can be neither just nor unjust" with the proviso that this holds good as long as nature is not somehow personalised and filled out with intentionality: hurricanes, if understood as a rapidly rotating storm system and not as God's vengeance, can wreak havoc, but cannot be criticised for their injustice. A Martian visiting earth who, after witnessing a tree fall down and kill a man, declares the tree's injustice, would have to be corrected in a way similar to Ryle's visiting foreigners. He is applying a concept with no jurisdiction in this instance.

So far, this application of the concept of justice to events in the natural world seems to have the same unquestionably wrong quality as Ryle's examples. However, once Hayek describes the whole idea of 'social justice' as a category mistake, the alleged mistake is open to challenge.

The grounding of Hayek's rejection of the term 'social justice' rests on the following assumption:

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Hayek. *Law, Legislation and Liberty: Vol II, The Mirage of Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1998 [1976]) 31.

There can be no test by which we can discover what is 'socially unjust' because there is no subject by which such an injustice can be committed and there are no rules of individual conduct the observance of which in the market order would secure to the individuals and groups the position which as such (as distinguished from the procedure by which it is determined) would appear just to us. It [social justice] does not belong to the category of error but to that of nonsense, like the term 'a moral stone'".<sup>7</sup>

Hayek has moved from saying that the term justice cannot be applied to acts of nature, to suggesting that a state of society cannot be described as just—indeed as either just or unjust – because no-one has acted unjustly and there exist no rules of individual conduct which, by being observed, could bring about a distribution of rewards and positions we could consider just. What is doing the work in designating the concept 'social justice' a piece of nonsense on a par with the idea of a 'moral stone'?

Hayek claims that to attach the words 'social' or 'distributive' to 'justice' is 'an abuse of the word':<sup>8</sup> that 'in a society of free men whose members are allowed to use their own knowledge for their own purposes' the term 'social justice' is 'wholly devoid of meaning or content'.<sup>9</sup> The problem and danger,

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 98.

from Hayek's perspective, is that the expression is increasingly widely used and invoked as 'a standard which ought to guide political action' and it is hardly ever questioned whether 'the expression has a definite meaning.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the belief that 'the expression has a definite meaning, describes a high ideal and points to grave defects in the existing social order which urgently call for correction' receives 'near-universal acceptance' and, Hayek thought, 'is at present probably the gravest threat to most other values of a free civilization'.<sup>11</sup> For Hayek, the key to understanding why so many make this category mistake is to see that it is a direct consequence of 'the anthropomorphism or personification by which naïve thinking tries to account for all self-ordering processes'.<sup>12</sup> Hence 'the results of the spontaneous ordering of the market' are 'interpreted as if some thinking being deliberately directed them, or as if the particular benefits or harm different persons derived from them were determined by deliberate acts of will, and could therefore be guided by moral rules'<sup>13</sup> Instead of viewing society as 'a spontaneous order of free men,' it is seen as 'an organization whose members are all made to serve a single hierarchy of ends. This would necessarily be a totalitarian system in which personal freedom would be absent.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 66- 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

Hayek is clearly aware that the category mistake in question is not easily correctable. He knows that his contention that, ‘in a society of free men’, the very idea of ‘social justice’ involves a category mistake ‘cannot be *proved*’.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Ryle’s foreign visitors to Oxford and the cricket match, who can be quickly convinced where they went wrong and why, people—indeed, it would seem, nearly all people—are going to need much more than a friendly induction into local knowledge and linguistic usage. In other words, Hayek cannot do to social justice what Ryle did to the conceptual vocabulary of the Oxford visitor.

Hayek faced a truly formidable challenge, recognizing that ‘the near-universal acceptance of a belief does not prove that it is valid or even meaningful any more than general belief in witches or ghosts proved the validity of these concepts’.<sup>16</sup> Hence the unmistakably *embattled* character of Hayek’s text. We are, he wrote, facing a ‘quasi-religious superstition,’ which ‘we must fight when it becomes the pretext of coercing other men’; it constitutes ‘a threat’ against which we must protect ourselves by ‘subjecting even our dearest dreams to ruthless rational dissection.’<sup>17</sup> These words display not only that what is at stake here is political on the grandest scale, embracing the defence of free-market capitalism, the challenge of socialism and the prospects for social democracy. They also reveal both the *agonistic* nature of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 66 – 67.

the challenge ('we must fight') and the understanding that the fight is in the realm of ideas and arguments ('ruthless rational dissection').

That is why in 1947 Hayek joined with others to found the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), involving Nobel prizewinning economists, philosophers, historians, business leaders and others, to combat 'the state ascendancy and Marxist or Keynesian planning [that was] sweeping the globe', with the goal of facilitating 'an exchange of ideas between like-minded scholars in the hope of strengthening the principles and practice of a free society and to study the workings, virtues, and defects of market-oriented systems'. Hayek's project, in short, was to engage in the battle of ideas with the key goal, among others, of rendering the very idea of social justice, and thus complaints of injustice, inapplicable to the understanding of market processes. Hayek was not alone in pursuing this project. He enjoyed considerable support from the academics in MPS, as well as from other agents and institutions. The aim of this project was the discrediting of widely prevailing views of and hopes for social justice. It has, over the last seventy years, met with no little success. It was, however, not the only strategy with this aim. Others retained but redefined the concept of social justice, delinking it from the anthropomorphism Hayek disdained, and instead interpreting the value of justice along individualistic, libertarian and market-favouring lines that proclaimed as illegitimate the pursuit of egalitarian,

indeed on some views all, patterned distributive outcomes (as, for instance, in Robert Nozick's classic formulation of entitlement theories of justice.<sup>18</sup>

Such projects, we will argue, are projects of *occlusion*: of rendering certain things *invisible* by casting doubt on the credibility of particular ways of describing phenomena. Such projects can be more or less successful: complete success of such a project would consist in rendering certain descriptions altogether useless, the conceptual apparatus employed in such descriptions nonsensical, archaic and, most importantly, utterly mistaken.

Such projects compete with other projects. The terms by which such competition gets performed are themselves up for grabs. Whether Hayek's insights represent progress toward, for example, a better description of society depends on how those insights are assessed. In light of this competition over the terms of assessment, it becomes possible to ask whether Hayek was reporting (as he thought) on a scientific discovery by Austrian economics, a discovery that would (he hoped) render talk of social justice anachronistic and ultimately thinkable only by historians of economic thought – on a par with the way in which phlogiston would be viewed by later scientists. From within his project Hayek was attempting to pre-empt controversy by declaring the very term 'social justice' a category mistake capable of delivering only nonsense. Hayek, of course, could 'think' the idea of social justice – the concept was available to

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Nozick. *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. (USA: Basic Books, 1974).

him. He could even make pronouncements condemning such widely-shared thoughts as wrong-headed and dangerous. The pre-emptive move constitutive of occlusion comes precisely here: between, on the one hand, the concepts that can be thought and, on the other, the ways in which those thoughts either get taken seriously as ways of describing the real world and what is thought possible within that world, or dismissed as fundamentally misguided about that reality. In other words, for Hayek and members of the MPS more generally, the thought that some distributional pattern could be imposed on complex societal systems was to be treated as a failure to understand the nature of those phenomena, i.e. the ‘self-ordering processes’ or ‘the spontaneous order of free men’ that constitute the market and market society.

People can still ‘think’ about social justice in a way that Hayek would rail against. His (unrealized and unrealizable) hope was that the very *language* of ‘social justice’ would become obsolete, so that social justice would be inconceivable because the very concept would no longer be available. But, short of that unachievable goal, the idea of social justice could nevertheless be made into a ‘mirage’ (Hayek’s word). In short, what could be ‘seen’ by use of the term ‘social justice’ could be dismissed as illusory, with the implication that social justice is neither *feasible* nor, even if attained, *viable*. The common sense which grew out of the MPS’s strategies, and which came to influence the economic policies of both states and other non-state institutions, provided a

context within which ideas and policies that appealed to forms of government hoping to impose patterns of distribution could be treated as fundamentally mistaken, as dabbling in illusions. This lends such a project potentially enormous power in constructing not just the language by which certain phenomena are described, but what gets done about them.

But adjudicating between a correct vision of the world and a mistaken one invites some obvious questions. What grounds the claim that one vision is correct and another or others mistaken? (the *why* question) Who makes the claim? (the *who* question) Who are the addressees of the claim? (the *whom* question) Whose interests does its general acceptance serve? (the *cui bono* question). By what means and in what ways is that acceptance secured? (the *how* question).<sup>19</sup>

### **Anthropomorphism and animals**

Occlusion is at its most effective when what is occluded is ruled out, or excluded, from consideration, for what seems the purest common sense, where occlusion, as we might say, ‘stands to reason.’ For example, as already noted, it can seem obvious that nature itself cannot be criticised for its injustice. But does anthropomorphism—the attributing of human characteristics or behaviour to

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<sup>19</sup> Raymond Geuss. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008) 25.

gods or animals or objects--necessarily issue in category mistakes? That humans invariably anthropomorphize their gods is hardly surprising (What else could they do?). Is it, in principle, a violation of the scientific spirit and thus incompatible with practising (natural and social) science? Can it sometimes be a useful way of approaching and describing and explaining certain phenomena?

It is intriguing that Hayek focuses on anthropomorphism as a category mistake that leads us to misunderstand social phenomena. For consider anthropomorphism in relation to nonhuman animals: Is it self-evidently wrong to speak about chimps laughing when they get tickled (and engage with it in the complex way a child does, withdrawing before coming back for more), crows using tools or cuttlefish being able to perform facial recognition.? It has always been a live question whether and to what extent (and with respect to which species of animals) it is a mistake to describe animal behaviour in terms of characteristics regarded as human. It is probably true to say that in most societies among ordinary people in everyday life there are different attitudes in respect of different species but anthropomorphising pet animals doubtless receives (as Hayek might say) near universal acceptance. On the other hand, many philosophers and scientists, including biologists and others studying animals, have viewed it as a mistake to be avoided at all costs.

Frans de Waal praises David Hume for recognising a continuum between animal and human behaviours, and criticizes behaviourists and other scientists

who deploy two separate languages, such that, for example, ‘shared human and ape behaviour is explained differently.’<sup>20</sup> For de Waal, by contrast, anthropomorphism is a good research strategy if your goal is to arrive at ‘testable ideas and replicable observations.’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it is (as the epigraph from Kenneth Burke to this essay suggests) worth asking the question, which the idea of a category mistake closes off, whether it makes better explanatory sense to endow animals with human-type attributes. How we answer that question is to be decided according to our assumptions about what constitutes an adequate explanation of animal behaviour.

Why, then, is it claimed that anthropomorphizing animals is a mistake? Why do people engage in boundary work in this human-animal domain? De Waal calls this resistance to anthropomorphism ‘anthropodenial’ – ‘the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals’, a ‘wilful blindness to the human-like characteristics of animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves.’<sup>22</sup> One apparently obvious explanation for this rejection is in terms of *vested interests*: We have a stake in retaining mastery over the animal world and in erecting a wall between the species. As the philosopher Christine Korsgaard suggests, it may be thought that we are ‘more likely to be comfortable in our treatment of our fellow creatures if we think that

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<sup>20</sup> Frans De Waal and Stephen Macedo (eds.) *Primates and Philosophers. How Morality Evolved*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 62.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 65.

being eaten, worn, experimented on, held captive, made to work and killed, cannot mean anything like the same thing to them as it would to us' and hence if they are 'unlike us in their emotional and cognitive lives.'<sup>23</sup>

That is, however, an explanation, in terms of *motivation*, not a *justification*, in terms of reasons. In offering such reasoned justification for the rejection of anthropomorphism, as distinct from the aforementioned motivational account, Korsgaard, a Kantian, essentially argues (without using the phrase) that to speak of moral (nonhuman) animals is to commit a category mistake. (But note that a 'moral animal' is more controversial in ways that a 'moral stone' is not). They are, she writes, 'beyond moral judgment.'<sup>24</sup> She asserts that they act intentionally but not at the 'deeper level of intentionality.'<sup>25</sup> Their purposes are given to them by their affective states—their emotions and their instinctual or learned desires. They are, she suggests 'in Harry Frankfurt's phrase, wanton: they act on the instinct or desire or emotion that comes uppermost.'<sup>26</sup> They clearly exhibit intelligence: they pursue purposes, perform actions under the agent's control, and some animals are aware of their purposes and think about how to pursue them. But she is 'tempted by' an 'old-fashioned philosophical project, dating back to Aristotle' that seeks to fix the 'central difference' between humans and other animals, locating it in the claim that

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 103 – 104.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 118

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 111

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 102

‘morality represents a break with our animal past.’<sup>27</sup> Unlike Hume and his fellow sentimentalists, Kantians focus on the ‘deeper level of assessment’,<sup>28</sup> unique to humans, that renders choice possible: where the question before the agent is not which action will get what you want most, but whether your wanting it most is a good reason, that is justifies, taking that action. Hence the capacity to think whether what you are doing is right or wrong. Hence the capacity to choose our ends, for autonomy, for normative self-government, for reflective distance from one’s motives that enables one to ask whether one should be so motivated. Hence Adam Smith’s internal spectator forming judgments about the propriety of our own feelings and motives. Hence humans’ capacity to be motivated by what Darwin called ‘that short but imperious word “ought”’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in response to Korsgaard, de Waal concedes that other animals operate at the concrete behavioural level while humans ‘follow an internal compass, judging ourselves (and others) by evaluating the intentions and beliefs that underlie our own (and their) actions’ and, in short, that ‘this level of morality, with its desire for consistency and “disinterestedness,” and its careful weighing of what one did against what one could or should have done, [is] uniquely human.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 104

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 110

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 114

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 174

But notice that the question here—whether anthropomorphism about nonhuman animals is a category mistake—is inherently controversial, and in several ways. What is at issue is, in part, a range of questions over which philosophers have disagreed and continue to do so—Hume and Kant, sentimentalists and rationalists. Central among such questions is how to conceive of morality and where its boundaries lie. Thus Korsgaard writes that ‘the ability to form and act on judgments of what we ought to do’ constitutes ‘the essence of morality’,<sup>31</sup> whereas de Waal (who writes of morality as a tower with several levels) sees this only as the highest level of morality more broadly conceived. And, further, it is unclear what in this discussion is *a priori* and what empirical. De Waal, as we have seen, writes of ‘anthropodenial’ as ‘the *a priori* rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals’ and Korsgaard, as a Kantian, seems to be making an *a priori* claim about the essence of morality, while also making empirical claims about animals as wantons and asserting that ‘how far in the animal kingdom [the capacity for autonomy extends] is certainly an empirical one.’<sup>32</sup> (If nonhuman animals were discovered to exhibit signs of such a capacity would they then count as candidate humans?)

Recognizing certain categorial boundaries may make little or no direct practical difference to our lives. Correcting Ryle’s visitors’ category mistakes will enable them to make some sense of visiting Oxford and watching a cricket

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

match, but that is all. However, this discussion of anthropomorphism does have the potential to make some practical difference to how we understand and treat animals.

Korsgaard does not take her Kantian view of morality to endorse the vested interests explanation for distinguishing humans from other animals. Indeed, she takes her view roundly to condemn mistreating them in the way we so often do. She cites a story (taken from de Waal) of a capuchin hurling a squirrel monkey at a human observer and comments that ‘no species is more guilty of treating those who belong to other kinds as ambulant objects than we are, and we are the only species that knows it is wrong,’ so that we are ‘under a strong obligation to treat the other animals decently, even at cost to ourselves.’<sup>33</sup> The idea that a category mistake is made when describing animals as capable of morality is thus used to *extend* the moral obligations humans have toward animals.

Alternately, when de Waal recommends the virtues of a carefully refined anthropomorphism, his intention is to open up new ways of looking at the world, ways that could complement and improve ongoing research in the field of experimental biology and ethology. It is one perspective, one that certainly exists in tension with other perspectives, but a tension that has the potential to be virtuous and productive. His intention is not, for example, to appeal for a

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 118 – 119.

kind of gratuitous anthropomorphism that would allow for all animal behaviour to be understood as having an analogue with all human behaviour: Gorillas developing concern for climate change for instance, chimpanzees having religions, or dolphins smiling with delight when swimming with hotel guests. And, we may add, ants and bees, for example, are rightly described as ‘social’ but they are so in very specific ways that need to be closely specified. The idea of the category mistake is thus preserved, but moved further back. Some animal behaviour is continuous with human and should be integrated into our understanding of their respective behaviours, but other behaviours are not and so warrant continued exclusion.

### **Hayek and Polanyi: The Dangers of making mistakes**

This foray into the debate over the rightness or otherwise of describing animals in vocabulary ordinarily preserved for humans, demonstrates the fluidity that can accompany our definitions and understandings of certain phenomena. What we take to be the fixed, bottom-line and common sense perception of the world around is open to dispute and contestation.

Hayek’s designation of the correct boundary for designating category mistakes is especially radical in that it seeks precisely to *deny* the possibility for any such fluidity: From the ground up, the whole discourse on social justice is discarded. It is not as if *some* social justice can be incorporated into an overall picture of the world: His is not a *negotiation with*, but rather a wholesale

*rejection of*, any discourse, research strategy or social/political/economic intervention that would look to make use of the ideas of social justice.

Opponents who use such terms have simply got it wrong: The possibility for meaningful discussion going forward demands that such usage be dropped because the reality that exists, according to Hayek, at the bottom of all complex social processes, renders the whole vocabulary of social justice unintelligible. In order to challenge this level of occlusion, in order to be able to speak of social justice, requires that a fundamental challenge be mounted against that descriptive starting point. This is not about moving the boundary of a category mistake forwards or backwards, as in our discussion of anthropomorphism above, but challenging, in its entirety, a particular view of reality and all that is consequent to that view. It is thus to confront the accusation of having made a category mistake with an accusation of one's own.

One challenge to Hayek's description comes from Karl Polanyi. In what follows, we are not committed to Polanyi's alternative as the better one. Rather, our argument is only that these issues, like anthropomorphizing animals, are inherently controversial in a way Ryle's category mistakes and the notion that talk of moral stones is nonsense, are not. It is the inescapable controversy surrounding the descriptions and prescriptions surrounding our understanding of concepts, practices and what to do about them, that is our concern. Furthermore, it is also through the various *approaches* that are adopted in handling and

indeed using this kind of controversy that occlusion becomes such a powerful *political* tool.

Polanyi, like Hayek, is exercised by the importance of identifying and avoiding category mistakes when describing the realities of social and economic life. Both Polanyi and Hayek can be said to agree that a functioning economy requires the meeting of certain background conditions, not least a framework of law, but also social and cultural preconditions that guarantee trust and mutual predictability between market participants.<sup>34</sup> Where they differ, however, is in terms of how the market fits into their overall description of society. For Hayek, the market performs a self-regulating function, such that once those minimal background conditions are established, it cannot abide any form of interference. It is this occlusion of possibilities for the imposition of will on the processes of the market that, for Hayek, renders social justice just so much nonsense.

For Polanyi, the market so construed is a *fiction* dependent on its own set of category mistakes. Polanyi's idea of an 'always-embedded market economy' directly confronts those who regard the market as an institution capable of autonomy from their social and cultural context and from processes of political decision-making.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Polanyi emphasizes the entwined logic of interactions between market and state, rather than subordinating either one to

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<sup>34</sup>Karl Polanyi. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. (Boston: Beacon, 2001 [1944]). 57

<sup>35</sup> Fred Block & Margaret R. Somers. *The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi's Critique*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014) 91 – 97.

the other: there is no autonomous market in which the state operates merely as an enforcer of contract or a disorganiser of pernicious collective interests.

Market society depends upon continuous extra-economic influences, including political coercion, which cannot be confined merely to the moment of the market's formation.<sup>36</sup>

The fiction of the autonomous, self-regulating market is, for Polanyi, in turn grounded on the further category mistakes that land, labour and money can be treated as commodities, i.e. as objects produced for sale on a market. The theory of market self-regulation assumes that these 'fictitious commodities' can, like all other *actual* commodities, be brought into equilibrium with each other and with commodities-proper, by an effectively autonomous price mechanism (Ibid.:71-80). It is as a consequence of making and compounding these category mistakes that the intense dangers represented by market society have their seed. Since our aim here is not to adjudicate between the rightness of Polanyi vs. Hayek (or anyone else for that matter) there is no need here to go into the historical patterns and trajectories Polanyi uses to make his point. It will suffice to note that his argument is structured around the way various classes organised to protect these three fictitious 'substances' against the commodification that was being imposed by competing classes. From this alternative perspective, Hayek is thus guilty of making *two* category mistakes. First, he treats non-

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<sup>36</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. 147

commodities as if they were or could ever be commodities. Second, the market is treated as a space that can be rendered distinct from social life and political policies and decisions and thus the coercive encroachments of state power.

### **Occlusion, Power and Controversy**

Category mistakes come at different levels of occlusiveness depending on precisely what, and how much, they pre-empt. Three distinct levels are suggested by our discussion so far. First, there are the unquestionable ones that are just mistakes, like ‘moral stones’ or those resulting from misunderstanding how to describe the arrangements of a university or a game of cricket. Secondly, there are mistakes which some see as obvious but others do not, mistakes where the criteria are inevitably more controversial and the ability to say something determinate about what is to count as a category mistake is altogether more contestable, but where no *direct* practical implications follow. The contending sides are engaged in a dispute of practical significance, there is room for debate and the issues in dispute are plainly visible to the disputants. Thus, whether or not one views animals anthropomorphically does not *dictate* (though it will certainly influence) how one treats them: humans can, it seems, rationally disagree over whether the Categorical Imperative requires them to be vegetarians, or perhaps vegans. Nevertheless, to describe something as a category *mistake* is to say something determinate and definitive, even pre-

emptive: the point is to prevent subsequent misapplication of a concept or description to the category in question. It is, despite the contestability of whatever position one adopts, to argue strongly against the imposition of particular understandings onto particular phenomena. To describe something as nonsensical or wrongheaded is to be unequivocal.

What distinguishes the third way of attributing category mistakes is that it is directly both thought- and action-guiding: to accept that one is mistaken has *determinate* personal, social and sometimes political consequences: it aims to foreclose discussion and to influence behaviour decisively in a particular direction. The stakes are not merely cognitive: to be convinced by Hayek or by Polanyi is to take a *political* stand. If we are convinced that Polanyi is correct that labour really cannot be commodified and that market society depends on the attempt to impose that status on labour, then we are committed to supporting resistance to such attempts. And if we believe with Hayek that policies aiming to impose ‘social justice’ on complex social processes amount to a ‘fatal conceit’ and that the ‘road to serfdom’ is paved with social-democratic intentions, then we are committed to supporting resistance to such dangers.

Both thinkers thus foresee and fear large-scale dangers flowing from the mistakes they expose—in both their cases, the danger of a menacing totalitarian future. Accusing someone of making a category mistake in this third way is the clearest case of what we are calling an exercise of the power of occlusion. It

consists in conveying a particular, controversial vision of the world by preempting another or others. It will be a successful exercise of such power to the extent that it gains epistemic authority—to the extent, that is, that it comes to dominate and define the common sense that informs a particular discipline or practice.

One way to describe the battle of ideas that occurs between exponents of different descriptions of reality is as a ‘credibility contest’. These contests take place between ‘bearers of discrepant truths [who] push their wares wrapped in assertions of objectivity, efficacy, precision, reliability, authenticity, predictability, sincerity, desirability, tradition’. From these processes emerge those who gain legitimate power to define, describe, and explain bounded domains of reality’.<sup>37</sup> But whatever forms the pushing of those wares might take, the force of the ‘better argument’ winning against the background of inevitable controversy is something that cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, controversy surrounds this very idea of what is to count as the better argument. The consequences of such contests are over what gets to be taken seriously, i.e. as the epistemic reality we confront when we confront the world in its various guises, and what gets dismissed as nonsense, as a failure to grasp reality before any confronting can get started.

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Gieryn. *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 1.

There is often something peculiarly charged about these credibility contests as they occur within the social sciences, perhaps especially for economics, because it is a discipline that is deeply imbricated with the concrete practices that fill our political, social and economic worlds. What Hayek and Polanyi exploit from the charged quality of such contests is the *danger* of making the category mistakes to which they alert their readers. Such category mistakes are thus turned into questions of morality and politics. It is not then solely about making one thing appear as preferable, perhaps even as ‘common sense’ at some level. It is also intimately tied up with making that which challenges this common sense appear altogether threatening and dangerous. Fear thus plays a crucial role in the story, the maker of the occlusive move taking pains to insist that unless we accept his or her way of seeing, we risk inviting certain consequences about which we should be actively *afraid*.

This double move is, we emphasize, performed by both Hayek *and* Polanyi. For Hayek the danger lies in the ‘fatal conceit’ of supposing the state – or any single agent – is capable of imposing definite end-patterns on a process that by its essential nature cannot truck such interference. The road to serfdom is paved with social democratic intentions. For Polanyi the fear is that failing to recognise that land, labour and money are ‘fictitious commodities’ will inevitably liquidate the ‘non-contractualized supports’ necessary for social life,

and end in social and cultural catastrophe.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely this process that, for Polanyi, paved the way for the totalitarian and fascist nightmare in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe.<sup>39</sup> Both make a *pre-emptive* move that closes down those grievances, motives and ideals which cannot make sense against the mutually exclusive assumptions that Hayek and Polanyi take as foundational.

### **Credibility: Who gets to describe the world?**

Fear of something can provide phenomenal motivational force. But in the heat of these ‘credibility contests’ what helps any particular designation of the correct source of fear gain ascendancy over another, such that it is then able to prompt action? An example of the fear-factor actually *failing* to drive what might turn out to be the necessary steps to avert huge disasters, is disagreement over the causes and extent of climate change. Conservation biologists, climate change scientists and concerned citizens ‘convinced that declining biodiversity imperils human existence’ have thus far been unable – despite predictions of catastrophic consequences – to shift policy, consumption patterns and economic organisation in a sufficiently radical new direction. To be clear, it is not as if these groups have been *entirely* dismissed as a ‘politicised and misdirected Cassandra’.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, given the matrix within which their interventions have been – and have to be – made, a matrix that includes huge vested interests

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<sup>38</sup> Block & Somers, *The Power of Market Fundamentalism*, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Polanyi, “The Essence of Fascism”, In *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, eds. John Lewis, Karl Polanyi, and Donald Kitchen (London. Gollancz, 1935) 359 – 394.

<sup>40</sup> Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science*. 13

for example (alongside press, foundation officials and average citizens), the fear-inspiring rhetoric of such groups has thus far failed to produce the kinds of radical changes that can avert planetary disaster.

So what does the work in rendering the fear summoned up by Hayek's warnings about 'social justice' talk active and policy-animating? And what has enabled the dangers outlined by Polanyi's critique of 'market fundamentalism' to be overlooked and overcome? One part of the answer is institutional. These ideas, and ideas generally, do not fall ready-made from heaven. Descriptions of the world and the prescriptions that emerge from them develop within circumstances more or less favourable to their being understood and implemented. When Milton Friedman declared 'we are all Keynesians now' he was engaging in a battle with what he – and fellow members of MPS – regarded as a set of background misunderstandings of economics, society and political power, that gave weight and force to the dangerous category mistake 'social justice'. It was then through mobilizing *against* this common sense that these ideas were able to be inculcated within the international institutional order.

The MPS was a "collective effort" that "can be described as transdisciplinary (developing norms and principled beliefs guiding students in different disciplines), interdisciplinary (though mainly involving social scientists), and trans-academic (though the endeavors to connect to particular audiences and the public at large were in the main organized indirectly through

think tanks and publishers)”.<sup>41</sup> It was a thought collective that took as basic the impulse to have its idea suitably integrated into the practices and institutions of the world.

The MPS was no monolithic cabal. There were certainly disagreements within members of the group – for example between the “three distinguishable sects or subguilds” identified by Philip Mirowski: “the Austrian-inflected Hayekian legal theory, the Chicago School of neoclassical economics, and the German Ordo-liberals.”<sup>42</sup> Countering whatever centrifugal forces might be latent to such conflicts thus required handling such disagreement in a mutually beneficial way. This diffusion and management of disagreement was also an explicit part of the overall strategy.

No less important was the crisis in the late 1970’s, which precipitated the speedy decline of Keynesian approaches to economic questions. In particular, the combination of high unemployment and high inflation (stagflation) that, under Keynesian models, was supposed to be extremely unlikely, meant that other ways of viewing the phenomenon and new explanations needed to be found to make sense of the world. The failure of the dominant explanatory model to explain this phenomenon, and the crisis more generally, provided the space within which new economic thinking and new methods of explanation

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<sup>41</sup> Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds). *The Road from Mont Pellerin.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009) 5 – 6.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Mirowski. *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste* (London: Verso, 2013) 42

could gain ground. To quote Mark Blyth, ‘the world was seen to be “at variance with the instruction sheet, so the instruction sheet had to be rewritten”.<sup>43</sup> At this juncture, the MPS was poised precisely to offer the necessary revisions to that instruction sheet.

However, it is, we maintain, unduly restrictive to see the power of occlusion as confined to the domain of intentional action: occlusion is not only the outcome of deliberate actions by individuals and groups.<sup>44</sup> Whatever Hayek’s and the rest of MPS’ acumen as strategists – which should certainly not be overlooked in the overall explanatory picture – the pre-emption and warning functions performed by occlusion do not depend for their success only on this purposeful exercise of power. Indeed, distinct from stories of MPS and other cabalistic instantiations of power are the everyday forms of occlusion we might not even recognise as such, since they are never rendered explicit or made provocative by reference to, for example, the making of category mistakes. Instead, such occlusion may occur in the everyday practices and taken-for-granted assumptions that organize the material of our lives, what we do and how we understand what we do. It operates, and is reproduced, in ways that are no-one’s and no group’s strategy. This is not to say that such instances of occlusion do not help to advance the claims and ambitions of certain groups, only that the occluding occurs in the absence of any explicit intentionality. These ways of

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<sup>43</sup> Mark Blyth. *Austerity: A Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 41.

<sup>44</sup> David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 74 – 75.

seeing – that are, again, also ways of not seeing – set the bounds of possibility. By taking a definitive stance on the appropriate way to describe the phenomena in question, we also define what we regard as ‘realistic’, ‘sensible’ and ‘common-sense’, and what is to be better understood – and for the most part rejected – as ‘misguided’, ‘dangerous’, and utopian. For any prescription that rests on a fundamentally mistaken description of what is being prescribed *for*, can only ever amount to a serious failure.

### **Deeper Occlusion: The example of Unconditional Basic Income**

‘Deep’ occlusion suggests that what does the occluding is somehow further away from being revealed. What obstructs our ability to ‘see’ or ‘think’ or suggest certain alternatives, is not immediately available to scrutiny. Indeed, we might not even be aware of certain of the controversial assumptions that are doing the occluding, so ingrained are they in how we view and approach the world around us. This is not to say such things are unavailable to scrutiny *tout court*, only that the offering of alternative approaches will require first the discovery and then the unpicking of those constitutive assumptions. In particular, such work of revelation might require the recognition that controversies exist, or might exist, in areas that are considered, more or less, settled.

For an example of this most subtle form of occlusion in operation, we turn now to a policy proposal that is currently emerging – tentatively – from

occlusion. This is the policy of an Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). A Basic Income is a sum of money given to citizens of a community without any stipulation of work or demonstration of a willingness to work. The history of the proposal is a long one, dating back, in one form or another, as far back as the Speenhamland system in the United Kingdom (which is central both to Polanyi's account of 'the Great Transformation' and to debates surrounding welfare for the past 200 years). It was also explicitly advocated by Condorcet and by Thomas Paine in his 1795 pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*.<sup>45</sup> Since then it has resurfaced in – various forms – in Green Party Manifestos, the work of thinkers as various as Bertrand Russell, Andre Gorz, and Phillippe Van Parijs,<sup>46</sup> and in small pilot-projects and experiments in places like Canada. It exists, in the form of a citizen dividend derived from oil profits, in the US state of Alaska. Recently, the proposal has been picking up considerable steam – political parties in New Zealand, Finland, Canada and Switzerland are taking the idea seriously, while political figures such as Robert Reich and Yanis Varoufakis are also weighing in with their support.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Paine. *Agrarian Justice* (1795) Available at: <http://www.constitution.org/tp/agjustice.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Bertrand Russell. *Proposed Roads to Freedom* (London: Arc Manor, 2008 [1918]); Andre Gorz. *Reclaiming Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). Phillippe Van Parijs. *Real Freedom for All: What (if Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Reich, Robert. *Labor Day 2028*. Available at: <http://www.basicincome.org/news/2015/09/united-states-robert-reich-focusing-attention-on-basic-income/>; Yanis Varoufakis. *Technical Change turns Basic Income into a Necessity*. Available at: <https://yanisvaroufakis.eu/2016/05/12/technical-change-turns-basic-income-into-a-necessity/>

Nevertheless, major barriers remain. At one level are the economic concerns. These include basic worries over costs and inflation, deleterious effects on labour markets, and the precipitation of capital flight. These fears derive from particular assumptions about how markets and money can and should operate. There are, though, other bases for scepticism about unconditional basic income that cannot be so readily explained by reference to these economic considerations, important as they are. There are also deep-lying thought-and-action-guiding reasons that can help explain the occlusion of UBI— from the consciousness of a great many people. To examine these, we need to consider that web of concepts that includes *work*, *the market* and *productiveness*.

One of the most common critiques draws on the widely held belief, popularised by Milton Friedman, that there is ‘no such thing as a free lunch’.<sup>48</sup> This expresses the idea that there is something altogether remiss in being given something – most especially though perhaps not exclusively, money – without providing something else in return. In other words, there is the sense, captured by the notion of *reciprocity*, that if one benefits from the burdens assumed by others, one should also, to the best of one’s ability, assume burdens and produce a benefit for others to likewise enjoy. Part of this reciprocal exchange takes the form of doing something *contributory*, something which other people, other

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<sup>48</sup> Milton Friedman. *There’s no such thing as a free lunch: Essays on Public Policy* (Chicago. Open Court Publishing, 1975).

members of the ‘cooperative venture’ that constitutes society, could value, as opposed to non-contributory activity or inactivity, often condemned as ‘parasitic’ and categorized as ‘free-riding’.<sup>49</sup>

Contribution and reciprocity are interdependent values – for something to reciprocate for the benefits produced by another any reciprocating effort must be directed toward and informed by the desire to contribute in some way to the interests of that person, either directly or *qua* member of the society or community in general. But what are the terms by which such value gets identified, assessed and even measured? What are the means by which we recognise whether or not reciprocity has been enacted?

The terms of exchange through which reciprocal relations get produced and reproduced are, in this way, dependent on the prior understanding of what such contribution can amount to: To reciprocate one must contribute in *particular* ways. Commonly, the receipt of a benefit such as *income* requires and symbolically registers that a person assume the burdens associated with working or, at a minimum, demonstrate a willingness to work. Obviously much then hangs on what is to count as *work*. Here again we arrive at an area of contestability and controversy. We are not, in other words, dealing with Ryle’s category mistakes, mistakes that can be corrected without much effort, but are instead in the midst of a far more complex and deeper-lying phenomenon,

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<sup>49</sup> Stuart White. *The Civic Minimum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

where inter-connected definitions about work, effort, burden, reciprocity and value are, actually or potentially, sites of disagreement, argument and outright struggle.

Some of the questions surrounding the definition of work include: Should work be understood as confined to the labour market, to the kinds of activity that can be bought and paid for as wage labour? Is the work of the *rentier* class to be described as work or something else? What about care-work and labour associated with housework? Is effort and time spent in attempts to find work, including the kind of “skilling up” such pursuit might involve – is this also work? In addition, how should work be valued and remunerated: Should it be valued according to the burdens associated with it, to what someone is willing to pay for it, or for how valuable some kinds of labour are for the community? And who, if anyone, should decide the appropriate metric for calculating such values? Finally, and as a coda to the above, is it necessary to work in order for a person to receive remuneration from his government? Is working something that can be legitimately demanded of people who might (reasonably?) have a preference not to work?

One widely prevalent assumption is that work is, in some sense essentially and of its very nature, *productive*. But productive of what? Of goods and services? Or of something less tangible and measurable? This in turn raises the question of what is not and/or *should* not be described as productive? These

questions are of course related: what we understand as productive is going to influence what gets understood as non-productive, which in turn informs our sense of certain behaviours being remiss for not being sufficiently productive.

Now, of course, there are some obvious examples of non-contributory, non-productive activity. A lifetime of loafing within the confines of one's living room is unlikely to satisfy anyone's definition of contribution. This is the archetypal example of non-reciprocity, variants of which might, within the popular consciousness, include both the 'welfare queen' and the Malibu surfer. But beyond these stereotypical examples of non-productive labour are activities that cannot be so easily dismissed as non-contributory and thus as failures to reciprocate.

Contribution is easily and it seems naturally conflated with activities that can be bought and paid for in a labour market, broadly conceived. The ways in which we are to reciprocate for the contributions other people make is by doing what they did – getting a job and performing the tasks associated with that job. For example, consider the original UN definition of work in 1956.<sup>50</sup> When the United Nations started collecting data to determine a country's GDP the kind of labour which was to count within the measure was defined in terms of gainful employment, further defined as 'work for pay and profit'. On this definition

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<sup>50</sup> Naila Kabeer, *Rethinking Ideas of Work from a Feminist Perspective*. Lecture Available at: <http://www.forum.awid.org/forum12/2013/02/rethinking-ideas-of-work-from-a-feminist-perspective/>

anybody working for a wage or salary, selling some part of their produce, is to be understood as working. *The market* is thus placed at the very centre of definitions of employment / unemployment, determining the value of what is counted as work. Where work cannot be organised – and thus measured – according to the market is pre-emptively excluded from this type of measurement. Over the years, there have been battles over the drawing of precisely these boundaries, what is to count as work-proper and what is not, i.e. what is seen as work and what is not. Particularly active within this field of contention have been feminists of various stripes who argued that such a definition excluded, without justification, whole swathes of labour performed almost entirely by females.

As a result there have been, over the years, various expansions to the UN's definition of work, which now includes activities, largely performed by women, such as animal husbandry and food processing. However, tellingly, the way in which these activities have been included has been to extend and complicate what we mean by the market organisation of work. Goods and services are now to be valued according to whether they *could* have been purchased in the market. So, if someone could have been paid to do that work,

then it gets included in a definition of productive labour:<sup>51</sup> *Potential* market valuation thus becomes work's defining feature.

Despite all these expansions then, what remains central throughout is the role of the market in determining the value of all relevant labour – if someone is paid or receives an income for what they do, then this automatically seems to confer contributory status on that activity. The relationship is also one of positive correlation – the more money paid for it, the more significant the contribution. Those expansions in definition – which should certainly not be downplayed – did not, however, effectively challenge the more fundamental assumption that organised the valuation of work through the institution of the market.

Against this backdrop of the central core of definitions of work as productive, consider what comes to be understood as free-riding. The inverse of paid employment is the not-working for pay or profit; free-riding thus gets framed by the absences of payment: The paradigm of free-riding becomes the worker unwilling to find work. But this loads some dice that need to be more carefully inspected. Consider, in contrast, the activities of the landlord.

Someone who actually does not, we might argue –we need only assert so much – do much in the way of actual labour. His access to payment is through the

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<sup>51</sup> It should here be noted the level of absurdity this way of thinking can reach. Understanding all labour in terms of the possibility to pay for it would, as noted by Margaret Reed, leave any and all activity understandable in this way – the only exception being the acts of eating and sleeping (which nobody but the person themselves can hope to fulfil). See *Ibid.*

ownership of land or property, not its cultivation, nor its being turned to productive use. This is the work of the renters rather than the rentiers. It is therefore at least an area of controversy whether this should count as a productive form of activity – one wonders if it is even really accurate to describe it as activity. This narrow way of conceiving of reciprocity, and its converse free-riding, is thus occlusive in two ways:

The way we regard productive activity through the paradigm provided by the market contributes both to the occlusion of certain kinds of productiveness, the work of women in particular as exemplified above, and certain putative kinds of free-riding or parasitism. First, there is the occlusion of the contributions to reciprocity made by those engaged in contributory but non-marketable work; Indeed, while domestic labour and care-work might be incorporated at the *technical* level of GDP measurement, the continuing treatment of contribution as derivable from the paradigm of what a market can organise and pay for means that *actual* payment for such work has yet to be implemented. The *potential* market value of such productive labour is all it has ever been allowed to amount to.

Second there are the non-reciprocating ‘efforts’ of much market-based employment, the *rentiers* for instance, who essentially accrue income (of sometimes staggering quantities) without doing anything other than owning a

piece of property.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, on the one hand certain forms of recognizably productive behaviours are still not being paid for and, on the other, various forms of activity are unquestioningly treated as productive.

The paradigm of (actually or counterfactually) paid employment is thus used as a heuristic device to understand all forms of productive labour. It is the market, and the monetizable value of labour that gives it its value. Money becomes a unit of measurement that in turn becomes a way of seeing activity in one way, rather than another. The unit might be presented as a merely convenient way of aggregating and valuing across differently situated activities, but the question remains whether money should be the criterion by which that which is useful and valuable is decided. What other ways of determining value get lost this way, are these to be regretted, and what is to be done with that regret?

One of the arguments for a Basic Income is precisely that it provides one possible way of both supporting and valuing forms of contribution that currently go unremunerated. While it does not do this on an hourly/weekly basis, or according to some contractual stipulation of the obligations associated with such work, it nevertheless provides money for activities understood as work that are a necessary condition for the economy to reproduce itself as a whole.

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<sup>52</sup> White, *The Civic Minimum*, 225.

How much other productive – or, more broadly, useful – labour is being excluded by our viewing it through the paradigm of paid-employment and the market? Approaching work according to what the market can organise and pay for we inevitably end up diminishing our understanding of what can and cannot count as valuable activity that can contribute to reciprocity. Basic Income offers a way for us to avoid pre-emptively assuming our ability to provide accurate and/or definitive answers to the question of *what is and is not productive*. It takes a stand only on the fact that the market is unable effectively to measure all of the relevantly valuable labour. By then providing adequate resources for individuals to *not* take part in various relationships or economic practices it assumes that where such activity is engaged with, it is done so more or less voluntarily. In addition, the provision of income sufficient enough to both support the individual and allow negotiation of the conditions and terms of that activity means that the work is both valued and, since workers can leave work they consider to be undignified or insufficiently remunerated, brought up to a minimal level of decency.

Undoubtedly this fails to address the issue of those who *will not* work with provision of a basic income. There are those who take a free lunch and have no intention of contributing or of repayment. Precisely how big a problem this is – at both the technical and moral levels – is a matter of debate: For instance, if certain free-riding is a marginal problem, as it arguably is today

(less than 3% of the Department of Work and Pension's budget goes toward UK unemployment benefit in the UK, only a fraction of which is claimed fraudulently).<sup>53</sup> then perhaps Basic Income is an all things considered good thing, despite such costs. Our intention has not been to weigh in on these issues directly, and certainly not to challenge the fundamental importance of reciprocity and 'doing one's bit' more generally. Our aim has been instead to complicate the debate around which descriptions of contribution and non-contribution get made, to provide a framework within which free-riding is opened up as its own area of controversy.

The introduction of a basic income could radically transform currently flailing – or even non-existent – welfare systems. What we hoped to have shown with this brief foray into basic income is the idea that regarding it as *utopian*, as misguided or as basically wrongheaded is to take a definitive stance on a range of topics that are inherently controversial and up-for-grabs. To dismiss it as an idea is thus, whether implicitly or otherwise, to take a side on these debates. For example, it is to assume a certain view of human beings as economic actors, to assume the market and only the market can properly assess productivity and valuable activity, to buy into the inflationary consequences of basic income. Our attempt has been to, question, albeit briefly, some of the

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<sup>53</sup> Public perception of this figure often misses the truth by a country mile: 29% of the British population believes that more money is spent on Job Seeker's Allowance than pensions, when in fact pensions amount to 15 times more expenditure. See Ipsos MORI. *Perils of Perception*. 2013. Topline Results Available at: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-rss-kings-perils-of-perception-topline.pdf>

assumptions that fill out those sides of the debate, and to perhaps encourage further reflection on them.

The potential re-emergence from occlusion of basic income in recent debates suggests that the time is becoming ripe to *challenge* these assumptions and these stances. The increasing automation of work, the expansion of exploitative working conditions and the continued precarity of work, and huge increases in inequality are just some of the conditions that are leading thinkers, politicians and activists alike to a broad-based advocacy of basic income.<sup>54</sup>

Increasing the potential of the challenges proffered by UBI will thus require an exposure of precisely what is being occluded, the assumptions that ground that occlusion, and what can be done to challenge them.

## **Conclusions**

Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. We call this inescapable fact *occlusion*, where the perspective that is assumed is *pre-emptive*, that is, working to render alternative ways of seeing less accessible because less credible or incredible. The *power of occlusion* is the capacity to pre-empt both that which gets seen and the terms of discussion through which what gets seen is described.

This capacity may be exercised more or less successfully. In political life this

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<sup>54</sup> Guy Standing. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

typically works by shaping people's common-sense understandings and thus their dispositions to act and it can do so by inducing fear of dangers.

The power of occlusion may be intentional and deliberate, even manipulative, but to understand it in this way is to be unnecessarily restrictive. At its deepest and most effective the perspective that gets adopted can be the consequence of a more or less unacknowledged web of interconnected and inter-defined concepts and beliefs. This is deep occlusion, since resistance to prevailing views with the aim of rendering alternative ways of seeing possible requires considerable excavation to make clear exactly what is being assumed and why. We have sought briefly to exemplify such deep occlusion by citing the case of unconditional basic income and its relationship to collective understandings of, amongst other things, work.

The power of occlusion works by establishing what is seen as 'feasible': by setting the boundaries that divide what is generally viewed as 'realistic' from what is taken to be 'utopian.' To be realistic regarding the world as it stands is to take a particular stand regarding the various occlusions at play at one time. Interrogation *of* and resistance *to* those occlusions requires an alternative framework by which to view that reality. These alternative frameworks are not always plausibly described as 'realistic'. Our suggestion is that this is the work of categorizing and classifying, which itself involves 'boundary work': defending and policing the categories and metaphors that we live by and that

inform our reasoning against actual and potential challenges. We have sought to show some of the complex ways in which the processes of occlusion make controversial claims to epistemic authority and how this can enlist the motivational force of fear in the face of dangers foreseen.

In the domain of politics this work is always inextricably both agonistic and argumentative: both establishing and maintaining credibility on the one hand, and justifying belief on the other. It thus involves both power and reasoning. What counts as the better argument in political life is a matter open to significant contestation (quite apart from the relevance of mendacity in politics which, sadly, all too often has a decisive role in how arguments play out). Beyond the arguments that are had in political life are a whole host of arguments that are *not* being had. Occluding an argument, one might say, is a smashingly effective way of winning it.