What is a Just Wage? The Fight for $15 and the Limits of Philosophical Ethics

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Cover Page Footnote
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I. INTRODUCTION: THE FIGHT FOR $15

The Fight for $15 movement is a campaign of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). According to the campaign’s website, the main demands are “$15 an hour and union rights.” While calls to raise the minimum wage are not new, over the last ten years the Fight for $15 campaign has reinvigorated the movement to significantly raise the government mandated minimum wage to $15 per hour as well as to urge large corporations to voluntarily adopt a $15 minimum. There are now ten states plus Washington, D.C. along with dozens of municipalities that have passed legislation to eventually raise their minimum wage to $15 per hour (Davidson, 2021).

Even representatives of prominent corporations have expressed support for legally raising the minimum wage or voluntarily raising their corporations’ lowest starting wages. At their June 2019 annual shareholder meeting Walmart’s CEO, Doug McMillon, called on Congress to “put a thoughtful plan in place” to raise the federal minimum wage. This was after Amazon raised their lowest starting wage to $15 per hour and challenged rivals to follow suit. Of course, it is perfectly legitimate to take Walmart’s and Amazon’s calls to raise the minimum wage by urging legislative or private action with a healthy dose of skepticism. Companies with the resources of Amazon and Walmart are more able to absorb significantly higher labor costs than much smaller, independent retailers. But whatever the motivation behind the calls for a $15 wage by legislators and corporations, it is clear that the Fight for $15 campaign has gained momentum. While the campaign

1 For information on the Fight for $15, see https://fightfor15.org/ (accessed June 20, 2023).
2 Service Employees International Union, “Campaigns,” https://www.seiu.org/about#campaigns, (accessed June 5, 2023). The push for a $15 minimum wage is far wider than this particular campaign. However, as the SEIU has attempted to galvanize and draw attention to every group that is seeking higher wages either through the legislative process or directly from corporations, I will target most of my suggestions to the Fight for $15 campaign. When I am speaking more broadly about movements advocating for higher minimum wages I will indicate that.
has had less success in unionizing workers, it is serving as a catalyst for increasing wages at the bottom end of the wage scale.⁶ Since the campaign has had significant success, it may be presumptuous of me to offer it advice. I will not, of course, offer any suggestions about its organizing or marketing strategy. Instead, I will address how the movement can ethically justify its claims. Since it is a mobilization campaign for low wage workers more than anything else, the movement does not need to have sophisticated and intricate moral arguments to be successful, but, if the Fight for $15, along with other organizations working to raise wages among the lowest wage workers, wants to see significant change throughout the country on these issues, it will need to convince a wide swath of corporate leaders, legislators, and the general public that raising wages is something that we all should support. Providing compelling moral reasons for their ends could go some ways toward convincing those who are skeptical about the movement.

II. FIGHT FOR $15’S CLAIMS

The clearest and most compelling way to argue for increasing wages at the lowest end of the wage scale is to appeal to the idea living wage.⁷ The Fight for $15 movement appeals to this concept explicitly in its appeal for workers to go on strike: “We need a living wage of $15 an hour to pay our rent and support our families and not the poverty wages that our extremely profitable employers give us.”⁸ The claim by the Fight for $15 and other advocates for the living wage is that $15 per hour represents, for now, a decent approximation of a wage that is necessary for an individual to meet her and her dependents’ need for food, housing, health care, and other basic necessities.⁹ In order to provide a solid ethical basis for the living wage, those who defend it must make a number of assertions.

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⁹ “The living wage is the minimum income standard that, if met, draws a very fine line between the financial independence of the working poor and the need to seek out public assistance or suffer consistent and severe housing and food insecurity. In light of this fact, the living wage is perhaps better defined as a minimum subsistence wage for persons living in the United States.” Amy K. Glasmeier, “About,” Living Wage Calculator, http://livingwage.mit.edu/pages/about. (accessed June 5, 2023). According to the Living Wage Calculator, $15 is under the $17.76 required for a
One claim that living wage advocates need to make is that human flourishing requires something more than bare physical survival. We see this claim assumed in the Fight for $15’s explanation on its website of “Why We Strike:” “We can barely pay our bills and put food on the table for our families. . . We work hard and we’re still stuck in poverty. . . It’s time to pay people enough to survive.” Survival for Fight for $15 clearly means something more than being barely able to make ends meet. The living wage defender needs to develop what Harry Frankfurt calls a theory of sufficiency:

It is essential to understand that having enough money is far from being equivalent to having just enough to get by, or to having enough to make life marginally tolerable. People are not generally content with living on the brink. The point of the doctrine of sufficiency is not that the only morally important distributional consideration with respect to money is whether people have enough to avoid economic misery. A person who might naturally be said to have just barely enough does not really, according to the doctrine of sufficiency, have enough at all.10

Any movement like the Fight for $15 that is pressing for such a significant increase in wages for the lowest paid workers needs to develop an account of what is required for human flourishing that is more substantive than mere physical subsistence. Thus, any ethical framework used to defend the living wage must have such an account of human flourishing beyond physical survival “built-in” to the system.

The concept of the family wage is closely associated with the living wage. As John Paul II defines the idea in On Human Work, the family wage is “remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family . . . which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future.”11 The Fight for $15 assumes something like a family wage in its claim we have seen above that the reason to strike is that “[w]e can barely pay

living wage for one person in my home county of Hillsborough, New Hampshire. If one adult is supporting one child, the living wage required balloons to $34.38. “Living Wage Calculation for Hillsborough County, New Hampshire,” http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/33011, (accessed June 5, 2023).


our bills and put food on the table for our families.” The concept of the family wage is also assumed in the well-known Living Wage Calculator developed by Amy Glasmeier, which provides data on how much money is required for a living wage based on the number of dependents the worker supports. The assumption that a living wage requires the ability to provide not just for oneself but for one’s family means that the ethical framework needed to support a living wage movement must be able to recognize that individuals do not exist in isolation, but are fundamentally persons in community, specifically the community of the family.

A final claim the living wage defender must make and defend is that direct employers have the primary obligation to provide all workers with enough wages and benefits to be able to reach at least a minimum degree of human flourishing. Fight for $15, like other living wage movements of the past, is a movement concerning wages paid by the employer. While a campaign for living wages is not incompatible with calls for an increase in government benefits such as universal health care, an assumption of the living wage movement is that the employer must provide whatever is lacking in worker’s basic needs because being paid properly gives employees an opportunity to flourish by communicating to them that their work has dignity and worth.

III. THE ARGUMENT OF THE ESSAY

In the prior section, I asserted that the Fight for $15 and other movements that want to defend a significant increase in the minimum wage, whether through legislative change or corporate choice, must make at least three claims: (1) Every worker deserves a living wage that provides for the worker’s flourishing beyond mere survival, (2) The living wage must be enough for the worker to provide for his or her family because the worker is not a mere individual, (3) This wage must be paid by the direct employer, at least to some extent, because the wage communicates value to the worker and is a sign of appreciation for the dignity and value of the work done by the employee. It is an acknowledgement that the worker’s work has value because it is core to who the worker is as a person. In the following section, I will examine some of the typical ethical frameworks, both consequentialist and deontological, used to defend the moral imperative of the living wage to see if they can ground the claims the Fight for $15 needs to defend. In examining these frameworks, I will argue that consequentialist and deontological approaches do not provide a sufficient basis for the wage demands urged by Fight for $15 and others demanding significantly higher minimum wages. My argument will be that these

13 Levin-Waldman makes the claim that wages communicate the dignity of work from a different perspective than the one I will take.
approaches are inadequate not because all the consequentialist and deontological arguments fail. I think there might be compelling consequentialist or deontological (Kantian and Rawlsian) arguments for (1), although it is difficult for both approaches to provide a solid ethical grounding for paying a living wage if the economic case for the living wage is unsuccessful. Yet, whether or not these approaches can ground (1), I hold that neither can adequately ground (2) because they do not have a sufficient anthropology that sees the individual as a person in community, particularly in the community of the family. They also cannot ground (3) because these approaches are usually focused on the effects of wages and not the meaning of the wage itself. In the remainder of the essay I will suggest that a promising place to look for a proper ethical grounding for all three claims is in Catholic social teaching as articulated in Pope John Paul II’s 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*). His account of wages, the family wage, and the theory of the human person on which the argument for the family wage rests can serve as a sufficient grounding for the Fight for $15 claims, if the movement is willing to consider it.

IV. **TYPICAL ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS TO DEFEND RAISING MINIMUM WAGES**

Some may object to any ethical discussion about a just wage or an appropriate minimum wage, claiming instead that the right wage is purely an economic matter to be determined by a cost-benefit analysis. Consequently, the question of whether or not to raise the minimum wage is often understood as a debate between hard-headed economic considerations and moral reasoning. For example, Ronald Adams writes: “Simply described, the arguments for and against an increase [in the minimum wage] can be divided into two camps or perspectives: (1) the traditional economic perspective which holds that minimum wage increases serve to distort market processes and do little or nothing to improve the plight of low wage workers; and, (2) the moral or ethical perspective which holds that workers deserve better outcomes for their labor.” While Adams admits that this description is oversimplified in that there are many economists calling into question the

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14 However, I am more hopeful of deontological frameworks to ground (1) than consequentialist frameworks. Consequentialist arguments are hard to separate from the outcome of the economic analyses and thus can only ground (1) if the economic analyses show minimal harm from raising minimum wages to a living wage. Yet I will suggest that the Kantian defense of the living wage is also more reliant on the economic analysis of the effects of raising wages than some defenders explicitly acknowledge.

traditional economic perspective that significantly raising the minimum wage is harmful to the economy overall and the very low wage workers it attempts to help. He also misconstrues the debate by suggesting that there are moral arguments on one side and economic justifications on the other. Instead, economic arguments about wages rest on (often unacknowledged) ethical assumptions.

A better way to understand the wage debate is to recognize the difference between, at least, consequentialist and deontological approaches to the question of the just wage. Most of the economic discussion about the minimum wage assumes a consequentialist framework of some kind, whether it be a utilitarian or welfarist framework that seeks to maximize individual preferences, a resourcist argument that maintains the moral goal is to maximize the material resources available to individuals, or Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach which focuses on what is required for someone to have the “real opportunity to achieve those things that she has reason to value.”

In fact most of the economic discussion of wages is based on a consequentialist and welfarist framework. For example, Joshua Preiss surveys many recent economists and claims that: “Contemporary economic analysis is overwhelmingly consequentialist and welfarist. . . Mainstream economic analysis, again like its utilitarian predecessor, differs from most conceptions of ethics in that it is welfarist.” This is not to say that all economic analysis is utilitarian in the classic hedonist sense; it is more focused on preferences as expressed through the self-interested choices that individuals make concerning money according to Preiss:

For the utilitarian, a practice or institution is judged solely according to its impact on the utility, frequently understood in terms of the happiness or pleasure of people affected by it. Contemporary economists, on the other hand, typically understand welfare in terms of preference satisfaction. . . Frequently, however, for the purposes of practical implementation (given

16 Adams, 634n.5. For one example challenging the traditional economic perspective on the minimum wage, see David Cooper et al., “Bold Increases in the Minimum Wage Should Be Evaluated for the Benefits of Raising Low-wage Workers’ Total Earnings,” Economic Policy Institute, April 18, 2018, Epi.org/143838 (accessed January 23, 2022).


issues of complexity and the availability of data) this more parsimonious understanding of preference is further reduced to willingness to pay or, even, income. 19

The economist Richard Spady presses the point about the consequentialist basis of contemporary economics even more strongly:

Economics conceives of society as composed of autonomous, utility-maximizing agents. The preferences of these agents for family, religion, baseball teams, and other things are essentially arbitrary—‘tastes.’ Economics functions as an ideology insofar as it willfully interprets all evidence to conform to this picture, normatively prescribes this self-understanding as the only rational way to think about social interactions. 20

The welfarist and consequentialist basis of traditional economic analysis has been recognized by many, including those like Sen who offer a competing consequentialist account to the traditional welfarist one.

In claiming that the economic arguments for and against the minimum wage often assume a consequentialist perspective, I am not claiming that all consequentialist arguments are merely economic ones. Instead, I hold that all arguments for and against the minimum wage rely on some underlying ethical beliefs, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. Therefore, we must address the ethical assumptions and arguments being made and not pretend we are looking merely at economic cost-benefit analysis.

Whatever particular consequentialist position one argues for, the consequentialist approaches the wage question by looking at the harms and benefits that will occur from significantly raising the minimum wage. How do we minimize harm and maximize benefits for those affected? On the other hand, a deontological approach, whether Kantian or Rawlsian, will focus on the justice of the direct wage itself. Is some kind of injustice is being done to the employee who is being paid a wage well below what it would take for her to live on? Can justice only be satisfied by paying every worker a living wage?

A. THE LIMITS OF CONSEQUENTIALIST ARGUMENTS

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19 Priess, 57-58.
Most consequentialist approaches to the question of whether the minimum wage should be significantly raised to the level of a living wage boil down to the consideration of whether it is worse for someone to be underpaid or for the individual to lose her job.21 Who is harmed more, the employee directly receiving a wage below what she needs to live on or the employee made redundant, or at least whose hours are significantly reduced, if the company is forced to raise her wage above her marginal output?22 As T.M. Wilkinson puts it in his consequentialist evaluation of raising the minimum wage, “[t]here are no important considerations besides jobs and incomes relevant to the assessment of the minimum wage.”23 So, what do the consequentialist arguments conclude about whether it is worse to lose a job or be paid below a living wage? It seems that it would be better to be paid an insufficient amount than not at all. However, there are a host of other factors involved for the consequentialist. If one receives unemployment and other social benefits when out of work, it might be better to have no job than a low paying one. Or, losing a job may cause the laid off worker to pursue more training or try to find work in a new industry and thus end up better off. There are so many possible consequences to determine in each particular circumstance that consequentialist approaches end up relying on economic analyses to make their determination. If a significant number of lower wage employees will be out of work due to raising wages at the bottom end of the wage scale, then the harms outweigh the benefits of raising wages. So, where do the economic arguments stand?

From an, admittedly, non-economist’s perspective, there seems to be substantial disagreement about the economic ramifications of raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour or beyond. For every prominent economist like Jean Tirole who asserts that bumping up the wage floor causes measurable job loss,24 there are other economic reports asserting that these concerns are overblown.25 In light of the evidence, the fairest conclusion to draw is that the economic picture is mixed. There will be at least some job loss for those at the lowest end of the wage scale, yet there will also be significantly higher wages earned by minimum wage workers.

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21 This is not an economic question but an ethical one. Genuine harm is suffered by someone who is not paid a living wage as well as the person who loses a job.
22 Adams quotes an example of the latter from Milton Friedman who famously objected to minimum wages: “What you are doing is to assure that people whose skills are not sufficient to justify that kind of a wage will be unemployed. . . The minimum wage law is most properly described as a law saying that employers must discriminate against people who have low skills,” 617-618.
24 Tirole, 55. For a consequentialist argument detailing a number of the negative effects of the minimum wage, including job loss for anyone whose marginal productivity is below the legal minimum wage, see Claire Hovenga et al., “The Detrimental Side Effects of Minimum Wage Laws,” Business and Society Review 118, no. 4 (2013): 463-487.
25 Cooper et al.
who keep their jobs. But which of these has greater moral significance, the loss of a job for some (or at least a reduction in their hours) or the benefits of many people making more money? Consequentialist approaches have no way to determine that independently of the negative consequences that result from job loss or the positive ones resulting from higher pay.

However, the issue for the Fight for $15 movement with the consequentialist approach is that all of the movement’s assertions rely on the ethical claim that being paid less that a living wage is a significant harm, wrong in itself, and should not be allowed by any society or done by any corporation that has the ability to do otherwise. At best the consequentialist arguments for raising wages will encourage us to raise the minimum wage to a living wage in some situations, only when significant harm in terms of job loss does not result from doing so. But this limited claim is not the kind of claim that the Fight for $15 wants to make, so the movement will need to look to a different ethical approach in its fight for what it believes is a fair wage. Thus, I am not sure that a consequentialist approach can ground the Fight for $15’s claim that paying a living wage is a moral duty (claim 1, from above).

B. THE LIMITS OF DEONTOLOGICAL—KANTIAN AND RAWLSIAN—APPROACHES TO THE JUST WAGE

Since consequentialist approaches to the minimum wage debate do not provide a solid basis for significantly raising the minimum wage to a living wage can a deontological approach, whether Kantian or Rawlsian, do better? To begin with the Kantian approach, it seems more promising than the consequentialist position because such an approach does not rely on the unknown effects of raising the minimum wage. If paying a wage below a minimum wage is unjust, then a Kantian should be able to explain why based on the categorical imperative and not because of any consequences that will result. Ronald Cordero attempts just such a Kantian argument based upon Kant’s formula of universal law: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

But Cordero rightly concludes that this formula alone will not be able to explain why paying below a minimum wage is morally wrong: “But does it also follow that it is necessarily immoral to achieve the good life by paying wages

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26 This is the broad conclusion reached by Adams (624-625), who favors raising the minimum wage, and Wilkinson (372), who is more skeptical about raising it. Yet, both are skeptical about how effective raising the minimum wage is as a way to lift people out of poverty. They each suggest other measures, like a universal basic income or a redistributive tax scheme.

below the good-life minimum? In spite of what Kant’s theory might be expected to say, I do not believe that it does.” If Kant’s formula of universal law cannot show that paying a wage below a living wage is unjust, what about the formula of humanity?

Kant emphasizes the fundamental dignity of every rational being in the *Grounding*: “Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists, as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. He must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end.” At first it seems that applying Kant’s principle to wages might be able to provide a basis for raising the minimum wage to a living level. This is precisely what Arnold and Bowie conclude in their Kantian defense of a living wage: “It is our contention that, at a minimum, respect for employees entails that MNEs [multinational enterprises] and their suppliers have a moral obligation to ensure that employees do not live under conditions of overall poverty by providing adequate wages for a 48 hour work week to satisfy both basic food needs and basic non-food needs.” To give someone less than they need to live is to commit a fundamental injustice because it is an affront to human dignity and does not allow the person to recognize her own dignity.

I find Arnold’s and Bowie’s Kantian defense of a living wage compelling, but there are still some plausible objections. What if the employee freely chooses to enter into employment knowing full well that it will not be a living wage? If the employee enters freely and advancement is possible through greater education or training, it is difficult to argue that a non-living wage violates Kant’s principle in itself. I do not mean to imply that a contract is never unjust from a Kantian perspective even if both parties freely enter into it, nor do I want to reject the possibility that low-wage workers are never in a position to freely enter into a contract with a corporation. However, I am not convinced that paying someone below a living wage always violates Kant’s formula of humanity, yet the Fight for $15 seems committed to the claim that paying someone less than a living wage when the employer is capable of paying it is fundamentally wrong. So, if this objection is decisive, Kantian ethics may not be able to ground all of Fight for $15’s claims.

The limits of a Kantian approach for the Fight for $15 movement is even more clear if we accept that raising the minimum wage to a living wage will cause

30 “Sweatshops and Respect for Persons,” 234.
some low wage workers to be harmed. If we know that raising the minimum wage will lead to significant unemployment or reduced working hours for some, then it seems that doing so would be using the suffering of some to achieve higher wages for others: “[So] the minimum wage boost would still be unacceptable according to . . . deontology . . . because of the harm to innocent individuals.” 31 If implementing a higher minimum wage demonstrably leads to significantly higher unemployment, then the Kantian principle seems to require that the minimum wage should not be raised due to the damage done to others.

Even though Arnold and Bowie defend the living wage on Kantian grounds, they also tacitly recognize the dependence of their position on the economic argument that there will be minimal harm to low-wage workers from raising the minimum wage. In both articles, after arguing that human dignity requires multinational enterprises to pay a living wage, they next discuss the economic result for low-wage workers from raising wages. Their contention is that paying workers more does not inevitably result in some other low-wage workers losing their jobs, but that the higher labor costs should be absorbed by other stakeholders. 32 But, I wonder if this concession to the economic argument weakens the case for the absolute justice of the living wage that the Fight for $15 wants to defend. Leaving aside a Kantian approach for now, what about a different deontological approach found in John Rawls’ theory of justice?

Rawls famously believed that in the original position behind the veil of ignorance we would settle on two primary principles of justice:

First [Principle]: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all. Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged . . . (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. 33

While there are various secondary precepts Rawls develops when it comes to determining a just wage system, these are the principles that hold ultimate sway. On first glance it seems that part (a) of the second principle would justify raising minimum wages to the level of the minimum wage. Will not the least advantaged in the wage system benefit from a living wage? However, the second principle does not justify raising the minimum wage if doing so will harm the least

32 “Respect for Workers,” 143.
advantaged by raising unemployment. If it could be shown that the wage could be increased without taking away any jobs, then it would be permissible according to the Rawlsian principles, but that is a high bar that cannot be proven in all cases even if it holds in some situations.

Yet, quickly dismissing a living minimum wage based on Rawls’ principles seems overhasty. After all, Rawls believes that in the original position we will favor principles that result in everyone’s basic needs being met:

The sum of transfers and benefits from essential public goods should be arranged so as to enhance the expectations of the least favored consistent with the required savings and the maintenance of equal liberties. When the basic structure takes this form the distribution that results will be just (or at least not unjust) whatever it is. Each receives that total income (earnings plus transfers) to which he is entitled under the public system of rules upon which his legitimate expectations are founded.34

However, despite the fact that the individual’s basic needs are met in such a system, this does not provide the theoretical support for requiring a minimum wage at the level of the living wage based on Rawls own interpretation of the fair wage.

First, Rawls thinks the individual circumstances of each person in society are too specific to be considered on the level of general principles and we would not choose to distribute goods according to the particulars of a person’s situation:

No attempt is made to define the just distribution of goods and services on the basis of information about the preferences and claims of particular individuals. This sort of knowledge is regarded as irrelevant from a suitably general point of view; and in any case, it introduces complexities that cannot be handled by principles of tolerable simplicity to which men might reasonably be expected to agree.35

But, the living wage as the basis for the Fight for $15 requires precisely that level of specificity in the general principle that every worker ought to be paid a minimum wage. Each worker is supposed to be given a wage that provides the basis for a flourishing life. However, Rawls explicitly says his principles of justice cannot get down to that level of specificity.

In addition, Rawls’ principles cannot serve as the basis for the Fight for $15 movement’s claim that justice demands a living wage from the employer because he does not think that need should play any role in establishing the wage system. Need only arises in considering the distribution of resources after wages are

34 304.
35 ibid.
received (e.g., in the form of taxes that shift income and benefits from well-off to needy): “The overall weighting of the many [secondary] precepts is done by the whole system. Thus the precept of need is left to the transfer branch; it does not serve as a precept of wages at all.” If the precept of need is limited to transfer and is not a factor in determining the justice of wages, then there is no grounding for the living wage. The Fight for $15, the fight to raise wages to an approximation of an individual’s living wage, is a movement grounded on wages paid by the employer. It demands that a significant portion of a person’s needs should be met by the direct employer and not only by society or government.

So, despite the promise of deontological approaches to the living wage with their emphasis on justice, neither Kantian nor Rawlsian approaches can serve as an unproblematic basis for a movement urging the moral imperative of paying workers a living wage. However, even if we think that a Kantian or Rawlsian could defend the moral imperative of a living wage (1 from above), I do not think, for reasons that I hope will become clear in the next section, a Kantian or Rawlsian can defend the second and third claims the Fight for $15 must defend: (2) The living wage must be enough for the worker to provide for his or her family because the worker is not a mere individual, and (3) This wage must be paid by the direct employer, at least to some extent, because the wage communicates value to the worker and is a sign of appreciation for the work done by the employee. So, the movement must look elsewhere for ethical justification for its position. As I suggested in the introduction, the Catholic ethical and social tradition exemplified by John Paul II is a good place to look. I will begin my discussion of John Paul II’s position on the just wage by discussing how he understands (1) the living wage as (2) the family wage.

V. JOHN PAUL II’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LIVING AND FAMILY WAGE

In On Human Work, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the profound ethical importance of the just wage:

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36 308-309.
37 This is not to say that the movement is incompatible with other calls for a universal basic income or the social safety net to be increased.
38 Michael Kates provides a very compelling Rawlsian account of the kind of wage that a sweatshop worker and employer would accept behind the veil of ignorance. What is most interesting from Kates’ argument for my purposes is that the Rawls’ original position would not generate a living wage in all circumstances. “Sweatshops, Exploitation, and the Case for a Fair Wage,” The Journal of Political Philosophy 27, no.1 (2019): 26-47. Also, see Cordero, particularly pages 211-219, for a compelling “semi-Rawlsian” argument in favor of the living wage.
The key problem of social ethics...is that of *just remuneration* for work done. In the context of the present there is no more important way for securing a just relationship between the worker and the employer than that constituted by remuneration for work...[T]he relationship between the employer (first and foremost the direct employer) and the worker is resolved on the basis of the wage, that is, through just remuneration for work done...[T]he justice of a socioeconomic system and, in each case, its just functioning, deserve in the final analysis to be evaluated by the way in which man’s work is properly remunerated in the system.39

By placing the question about what is required for a just wage at the very center of societal justice, John Paul II demands that our political and economic system grapple with the wage question. The Fight for $15 movement demands the same. So, what makes for a just wage according to John Paul II? His answer holds promise for Fight for $15.

John Paul II follows Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* (1891) in maintaining that a just wage is a *family* wage, “that is, a single salary given to the head of the family for his work, sufficient for the needs of the family without the other spouse having to take up gainful employment outside the home.”40 According to John Paul II, society has an obligation to provide the means to support a family either through the direct wage for the work done “or through other social measures such as family allowances or grants to mothers devoting themselves exclusively to their families.” For John Paul II, the family wage does not simply cover what is necessary for its bare material existence, but it requires “remuneration which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future.”41 Maintaining a family means, among other things, providing for the spiritual welfare of the family through being paid enough so that the laborer can have periodic rest to spend time with family, affordable health benefits that allow for the long-term welfare of the family, and enough resources to cover educational expenses for children.42

John Paul II naturally identifies the just wage with the family wage because of his understanding of human persons. The family wage rests on the belief that the human person is best understood not as a solitary individual but as a being in

39 45-46, section 19.
41 ibid.
42 45-48, section 19.
community, primarily the community of the family. Without such an understanding of the human person, arguments for raising minimum wages to the level of a living wage that will allow workers “to put food on the table for [their] families” will not be particularly convincing.\textsuperscript{43} The Fight for $15 needs an account of the human person that sees the individual as embedded in the family. This anthropology can be easily found in John Paul II’s account of human nature but not as easily in the anthropologies on which most consequentialist and deontological approaches rest.

The consequentialist, Kantian, and Rawlsian ethical approaches that we have seen often understand the individual as an autonomous unit and the individual alone as the focus of moral activity and rights. If employers or societies owe anything to anyone, they owe it to individuals. These theoretical approaches fail to see that the individual is inherently social, so they are unable to account for the fundamental social relation, the family. Whereas, John Paul II’s account of the human person, what is referred to as his personalism, can serve to justify a family wage because unlike consequentialist and deontological theories that see the human person as an isolated individual apart from her context, John Paul II understands the human person to be essentially one in communion:

Participation [in community] should be seen as a property of human beings, corresponding to their personal subjectivity. This subjectivity does not enclose people within themselves or make them impenetrable monads, but—on the contrary—opens them up to others in a way proper to a person. Participation, both in the case of the interpersonal community \textit{I—thou} and in the case of the social community \textit{we}, can and should be seen as an authentic expression of personal transcendence and as a subjective confirmation of this transcendence in the person.\textsuperscript{44}

John Paul II’s personalism provides an essential theoretical ground for a true living wage to be a family wage. Thus, the Fight for $15 should look to John Paul II to provide solid footing grounding for the movement’s claim (2, from above) that workers need to be paid enough to support their families.

So, how might John Paul II’s account of the family wage further contribute to the Fight for $15 movement by defending the third claim: (3) The family wage

\textsuperscript{43} “Why We Strike.”

\textsuperscript{44} Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II), “The Person: Subject and Community,” in \textit{Person and Community: Selected Essays}, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008), 254. See also Thomas D. Williams’ summary of Wojtyla’s position on the human person: “The person never exists in isolation, and moreover finds his human perfection only in communion with other persons. Interpersonal relations, consequently, are never superfluous or optional to the person, but are constitutive of his inherent make-up and vocation.” “What is Thomistic Personalism?,” \textit{Alpha Omega} VII, no. 2 (2004): 192.
must be paid by the direct employer, at least to some extent, because the wage communicates value to the worker and is a sign of appreciation for the dignity and value of the work done by the employee? His approach can ground (3) because he recognizes the fundamental role of work in what it means to be a person. Drawing on the earliest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, John Paul II claims that:

The word of God’s revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.45

Seeing work as fundamental to who an individual is, is an essential basis for Fight for $15’s claim that (3) the living wage must be paid by the direct employer regardless of what the law says.

Even though the direct employer must pay a family wage, John Paul II does not claim that the direct employer must bear the entire burden of that wage, for it is a duty of society itself: “[R]emuneration can be given through . . . a single salary given to the head of the family for his work . . . or through other social measures such as family allowances or grants to mothers devoting themselves exclusively to their families.”46 He does not specify what should be provided by society—governments, civil institutions, friends and relatives—as opposed to the direct employer because he is not writing a legislative proposal. The family wage is an ethical ideal that falls on all institutions and individuals in society to provide.

But, he does not let the direct employer off the hook. This is a point that is vital for the Fight for $15 movement to make when demanding the living wage be paid by corporations. The direct employer must pay some significant portion of the living wage because the wage is the primary way for the worker’s dignity to be respected as can be seen in the passage quoted in full at the beginning of this section:

[T]he relationship between the employer (first and foremost the direct employer) and the worker is resolved on the basis of the wage, that is, through just remuneration for work done. . . . [T]he justice of a socioeconomic system and, in each case, its just functioning, deserve in the final analysis to be evaluated by the way in which man’s work is properly remunerated in the system.47

45 57, section 25.
46 46, section 19.
47 45-46, section 19.
There would be something problematic with a family wage being entirely, or even mostly, covered by a private charity or by government in the form of food stamps, for example, or in the form of something like the Earned Income Tax Credit and not by the direct employer. Doing so would undercut the connection between work and wages and would undermine the worker’s dignity as a human being who is owed a wage for his or her work, a wage that the Fight for $15 insists is owed by employers regardless of the social safety net. Because the wage is the primary way for the employer to communicate value to the worker, there must be some connection between the worker’s need and the work provided.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the Introduction I suggested that the Fight for $15 movement, or any movement aimed at significantly raising the minimum wage to a living wage legally or voluntarily, must find an ethical approach that can ground at least three claims: (1) Every worker deserves a living wage that provides for the worker’s flourishing beyond mere survival, (2) The living wage must be enough for the worker to provide for his or her family because the worker is not a mere individual, (3) This wage must be paid by the direct employer, at least to some extent, because the wage communicates value to the worker and is a sign of appreciation for the work by the employer. My contention has been that even if consequentialist or deontological frameworks can support (1) apart from appeals to the economic case for the living wage, only John Paul II’s personalist approach to wages can easily ground claims (2) and (3). Thus, the Fight for $15 should justify its demands by appealing to Catholic social teaching as articulated by John Paul II.