

# IS A LOW WAGE A BENEFIT OR A HARM?

**FRIDAY, October 21st, 12:30 P.M. – 1:45 P.M.**

[REGISTRATION for zoom](#)

**Or in person – Adamian Academic Center, room 254**  
**Please rsvp to Gail Sands, [gsands@bentley.edu](mailto:gsands@bentley.edu)**

Much of the philosophical debate about the ethics of wage exploitation presupposes that low wage labor benefits workers. The debate has been about whether some employers who pay low wages ought to benefit their workers more than they do. The consensus that low wage work benefits workers presupposes a criterion for benefit and harm that involves comparing the effects of a transaction or relationship with a non-interaction baseline. This non-interaction baseline test is inadequate because it fails to acknowledge that it is possible to harm someone even if other potential causes of similar harms are lurking. An adequate account of harm will acknowledge that an employer can harm their workers even if those workers' other options would be harmful in similar ways. To occupy the bulk of someone's potential working hours without paying that person enough for a decent livelihood, despite being able to pay enough, prevents this person from earning a decent livelihood through work. If this person needs to work for a living, preventing the person from earning a decent livelihood constitutes a harm. Moreover, the harm is actively done, not merely allowed, and in many cases it is intended, not merely foreseen. Employers who can pay their workers a living wage are therefore culpable if they choose to pay substantially less.

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