

lobbies have now a dominant role in the government's decision-making patterns. For two years now, Brazil's right-wing government has carried out an agenda of undermining many of the existing democratic guarantees. Before Bolsonaro, no other political actor since the 1988 Constitution had set out to destroy public policies, with the hidden agenda of becoming an autocrat. The President stirs up crises between the branches of power. He signs executive orders to obstruct investigations into corruption scandals involving his family. He takes part in protests calling for the closure of parliament and the Supreme Court. Bolsonaro manipulates public opinion, and even the armed forces, propagating the idea that they should offer him unconditional support as a shield for his recklessness. The President has now effectively stopped governing in order to dedicate himself to rehearsing a *coup d'état*. On 7 September 2021—Brazil's Independence Day—Bolsonaro attempted a coup, claiming he would not comply with orders by the Supreme Court, but the military police forces in all states as well as the army refused to follow his lead. After that, he stopped attacking the constitutional order, without renouncing his attempts to establish an authoritarian regime.

Brazil today lives in darkness as to whether the President and his close brothers-in-arms—ten military men serving as state ministers alongside a submissive parliament—will try to destabilise the constitutional order again before the October 2022 presidential elections. Bolsonaro's ambition seems to still be an autocracy: a regime in which the ruler is above the law and in which the ruler's will is, in fact, the law.

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## Why are we equals? Just because?

PAUL SAGAR

*Unconditional Equals*, by Anne Phillips. Princeton University Press. 2021. 160 pp. £25.00

In this bracing and provocative book—a mix of reflection on personal intellectual trajectory

combined with wide-ranging theoretical analysis—Anne Phillips grapples with a question that has recently troubled political philosophers. What, if anything, explains the idea that we are all one another's equals in some fundamental, non-negotiable sense?

Whereas it is a relative commonplace in the established literature to agree with the legal and political theorist Ronald Dworkin's claim that all viable political theory now starts from an 'egalitarian plateau' and, in turn, it is presumed that so-called 'basic' equality is now universally endorsed (perhaps that this is even a defining feature of something called 'modernity' itself), Phillips is sceptical that this has been achieved. On the contrary, she is struck by the *divergence* from basic equality in lived practice. In particular, she points to the long history of how ideas of equality have been used—by both philosophers, as well as political actors—to *exclude* some from counting as equals. And whereas this is usually seen as an unfortunate inability of earlier thinkers and practitioners properly to apply their own principles (for example, realising that other races and women were equals too), Phillips sees this as *built in* to their thinking about equality. It wasn't an accident that they spoke of equality, but in practice treated some as less than equals: it was a direct consequence of a particular way of thinking.

That way of thinking is to suppose that equality must have a *grounding*: that equality is based on some feature in virtue of which those who possess it are *therefore* 'basic' equals. But the problem with this outlook, Phillips charges, is twofold. First, there just appears to *be no* such grounding: all of the leading philosophical contenders for identifying the 'basis of equality' collapse upon inspection, and cannot explain universal human equality, but only equality for those who possess the grounding (no candidates for which turn out, in fact, to be possessed universally—think of the very young, the severely handicapped, and so on). Second, and even more damagingly, this way of thinking about equality generates what it is supposed to avoid: legitimations of exclusion and the reintroduction of hierarchy, as those found to lack the grounding are relegated to the status of 'unequals'.

Against this, Phillips proposes that we reject any such grounding ambitions at all. Instead,

we ought to treat equality as something *unconditional*. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Phillips proposes that equality is ‘a claim and a commitment: a claim we make on those who have so far failed to acknowledge us as equals; and a commitment we make to ourselves and others to treat all humans as equals’. That is, ‘Equality is not a matter of proof or justification. Equality is something humans make happen by asserting it’. The idea here is that what philosophers have previously called ‘basic’ equality—though Phillips goes on to reject the idea as misleading, implying a prior grounding separate from the material realities of how equality does or does not manifest in practice—is something we create through the very act of deciding to affirm and believe in it. And by affirming it as something unconditional, we can hope to avoid the exclusionary tendencies of previous grounding accounts. Or, as Phillips has it, we need to get out of the game of attempting to offer *justifications* for basic equality, because those justifications open the door to exclusion (some will always fall outside its scope), and the exercise becomes self-defeating. It is even, she suggests, potentially dangerous: witness the history of putative egalitarians who excluded women, other races, for example.

Phillips’s position is arresting, and there is much to admire. Certainly, efforts to ground basic equality in some more fundamental property look doomed to fail. But it doesn’t follow that it is enough to say that we are equals just because we decide, and collectively say, that we are, and that’s that. Whilst I am sympathetic to Phillips’s point that basic equality is something we bring into being through our shared practices, not something we just happen to discover about the world and we who are in it, the problem is that as reflective agents we must confront the question of *why* we are doing this, and what it means when we are doing it, and, crucially, why we think we should go on this way.

The question ‘but why are we equals?’ cannot in all contexts be answered simply with ‘just because’. To be sure, there are certain contexts where that *is* an appropriate response. If confronted by a committed racist or sexist or bigot who wants to know why we want to treat other races and women and gays as basic equals, it may indeed be entirely appropriate to reply *just because*. After all, we have good reason to suspect

this person is not engaged in a dialogue of good faith, and we know full well what people like that do to those they deem less than equal when they get power over them. A basic aversion to cruelty and inhumane treatment is enough to convince us of the rightness of invoking unconditional equality as a response in that sort of context. Furthermore, doing so helps enact the very equality we are trying to secure (as Phillips points out).

But that is not the only (or even the most likely) context in which the question of ‘but why?’ is now there to be raised. If there is indeed something called ‘modernity’, as Phillips seems to allow, and if it does have a defining feature, a good candidate is that we now expect our ideas be transparent to ourselves and others, and hope to offer reasons for why we hold them. Somebody need not be in the business of denying that we are all equals and yet—in the mode or reflective agent, trying to understand their own commitments—find it legitimate to ask ‘but why?’, and in a variety of forms. But why in the relatively recent history of the developed West, has this idea of basic equality risen to particular prominence (even if Phillips is right that its extent is often overstated)? But why do we, in this kind of locale, make this kind of claim and commitment in this sort of way, and what are we doing when we do so? But why should others be expected to agree with us, and what are we going to say—to ourselves, to others—if they don’t? Answering these reflective questions with ‘just because’ isn’t enough, because politics is not constitutive of everything that we do and value, and an answer that may well be appropriate in certain political contexts does not simply transfer across to all other modes of experience. In turn, asking these ‘but why?’ questions reintroduces the same sceptical worries about basic equality that Phillips seeks to evade by abandoning the grounding approaches that all fall foul of the same.

We are thus left with a paradox. This stimulating book—which goes on to offer compelling reflections on the interactions between equality and material conditions, as well as the difficulty posed by the presence of difference and free choice—encourages us to engage in reflection, yet at its heart pivots on a stipulation that we close reflection down. As Max Weber once remarked, however, reflection is not a taxicab one can hail at will.

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