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UNCONDITIONAL BASIC EQUALITY
THE PROBLEM OF DIVIDING THEORY AND PRACTICE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Equality is something people make happen when they refuse to accept the status of inferiors. Equality is a commitment and a claim.¹

These last words from Anne Phillips' *Unconditional Equals* poignantly encapsulate her innovative approach to equality – it's a matter of *action*. You're not equal to someone because you're alike, but because you assert your equality. The crux is that equality isn't a matter of theory but of practice. She not just uses this mantra as a criticism of ideal theory but extends it to *basic equality*.² For the longest time, basic equality has always been relegated to a property of moral power that's common to *all* humans and thus justifies equal treatment. Phillips' new approach doesn't ask which property makes us equal but *if* a property makes us equal. Her answer is 'no', basic equality isn't something that is grounded in a property but by an unconditional commitment to equality itself.³ The conditionality of basic equality has been taken for granted for way too long in political philosophy. It's long overdue that we explored and problematize the implications of what we've taken for granted. The implications are no doubt grand for (basic) equality. If Phillips is correct, equality research till now will have been done from the wrong perspective. So, a complete realignment might be at work here. But much is to discuss before unconditionality can be accepted as a replacement for conditionality. And there is much to problematize about unconditionality that Phillips glosses over. This essay will delve deeper into her approach and will ask whether *unconditionality* has a case against its conditional counterparts. Can unconditionality solve the problems of basic equality?

This essay will make a stance against *unconditional basic equality*, and I'll try to show that Phillips' approach can't replace conditional basic equality because it's born from a problematic division of theory and practice. Unconditional basic equality further harbours issues in its theoretical fabric and its practical application. But the most problematic issue stems from Phillips' radical abandonment of theory for sole practical use. This division sprouts from the justified criticism of the overreliance on theory in political philosophy research at large but is then overcorrected by Phillips to an overreliance on practice.

¹ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 112.

² Ibid., p. 107.

³ Ibid., pp. 41, 53, 56f.

The main part of this paper is split into two. **SECTION 2** will introduce and define basic equality, conditionality, and unconditionality. Then, I'll note what conditionality's key problems are and further assert why Phillips claims unconditionality to a necessary replacement for conditionality. Following this, **SECTION 3** will expand on three sets of problems of the theoretical and practical realms.⁴ First, I'll tackle the **THEORETICAL PROBLEMS** which I acknowledge as the least convincing when arguing against unconditionality, because of Phillips' clear intention to banish theory from equality. However, they're nonetheless at the root of the following problems in the practical realm. I'll next target the **DIVISIONAL PROBLEMS**. Even if there are no theoretical issues, basic equality has implications for normative and applied equality. The division of theory from practice thus creates problems. But effectively, these divisional problems are by nature still connected with theory and thus something that Phillips wants equality to be rid of. Finally, I'll confront the **PRACTICAL PROBLEMS**. Those issues seem to be the most convincing. However, when unconditionality, for all its sacrifices in theoretical poisons,⁵ still harbours problems on its sole plane of effect, it can't replace its conditional counterpart.

⁴ The distinction between theory and practice that I make in the paper isn't one between theoretical and practical philosophy. What I mean by theory is the realm of theoretical justification of basic equality. Practice thus is concerned with the normativity and application of equality into politics and our lives.

⁵ ARNESON 2015, p. 52.

2. UNCONDITIONAL BASIC EQUALITY

2.1. BASIC EQUALITY, CONDITIONALITY, AND UNCONDITIONALITY

This first section will introduce definitions for basic equality, conditionality as well as its subcategories, and unconditionality. Let's start with basic equality: It's the concept that, on a most fundamental level, a group of individuals is equal (in some sense) to one another. This equality is **a**) morally relevant and **b**) pressures one to treat others as equals. However, because of this moral relevancy, basic equality has also been called *moral equality*, indicating a distinct moral worth among equals because of their moral qualities.⁶ Along with Phillips, I stand opposed to the term 'moral equality' as it reduces basic equality to an ethical issue of how good or bad one is when it really is about us deserving equal treatment because we're equal.⁷

Before I'll tackle the difference between conditionality and unconditionality, I'll have to distinguish conditionality from property-based accounts. Phillips mainly criticizes the latter, but a distinction is necessary as the terms aren't interchangeable. In short, all properties are conditions, but not all conditions are properties. A property can be a capacity like loving, a status like moral dignity, etc. – i.e. something inherent to the individual that, if shared with other individuals to the same degree, makes one an equal. A condition can further be understood as something that is attached to a *social kind* – i.e. a relational condition.⁸ Finally, equality itself can be a necessary condition for a separate issue of moral importance which makes basic equality insofar conditional as it depends on the achievement of another issue – e.g. would be *Hegel's self-realization*.⁹ The reason I insist on differentiating conditions and properties is that I believe that Phillips' critique of properties can be elevated to a general critique of conditionality. As showcased by the wide variety of different conditional accounts, this would make Phillips significantly stronger which raises the stakes.

From the above, it follows that conditionality conceptualizes basic equality by *justifying* and *grounding* it in a condition. Unconditionality makes the difference here: an unconditional account doesn't justify why equals are basic equals. They just are. Additionally, in Phillips' case, equality requires a commitment – i.e. something that people assert and make happen.¹⁰

⁶ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 43f.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. KILLMISTER 2022, pp. 6-13. For a different relational account, cf. NATH 2018, p. 844.

⁹ COHEN 2013, p. 194. This kind of conditionality will become problematic for unconditionality later in the analysis. See p. 9.

¹⁰ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 41, 53, 56f., 112.

I want to add that Phillips is not the first to develop such an approach. The first ‘predecessor’ that I’m aware of originates in Cohen’s *Finding Oneself in the Other*:

[W]e can distinguish between the view that you regard them as equal to you because that is how you wish to treat them, where the goal is primary [i.e. unconditionality], and the standard view that you treat them as equals because you regard them as equals, which is the view that prompts the wild-goose chase for defining characteristics [i.e. conditionality].¹¹

Arneson further developed this idea when he analyses the flurry of issues that conditionality harbours. He presents this as an alternative by ‘*eschewing the wild-goose chase*’¹² for conditions altogether. (However, Arneson has found several serious theoretical issues with this account. I’ll return to these problems in **3.1.** when introducing an issue of reflection). One important difference to Phillips’ account is that she centres the idea around a political commitment, while Cohen and Arneson stress a personal wish mostly based on morals. This distinction is significant as it resonates with Phillips’ point. Equality is a political issue in the practical realm. Politics might be based on morals, but morals aren’t always political. This shows the shift away from philosophical theorization to practical application.

¹¹ COHEN 2013, p. 194.

¹² ARNESON 2015, pp. 48f.

2.2. THE PROBLEMS OF CONDITIONALITY AND THE NEED FOR UNCONDITIONALITY

This section provides a discussion of conditionality's problems. I'll restrict myself to issues of property-based accounts as it's those that Phillips is most concerned with. Nevertheless, the reader should recall that many of those problems apply to other conditional accounts too.¹³ The following issues can all be solved by replacing conditionality with unconditionality and they thus showcase why unconditionality is so intriguing.¹⁴

I'll start with a dilemma concerning the quality of the basis:¹⁵ Either we distinguish an empirically measurable condition which must be **a)** purely moral and **b)** equally distributed among all equals, or we rely on a transcendental basis like the *Kantian noumenal self*, which also leads to issues as **c)** anyone who doubts this transcendental basis won't believe in equality either and **d)** if we then try to empirically justify it, we'd be back to the problems for empirical properties. Either way, it's hard to find a suitable property. Especially, the first horn encapsulates many problems of current property-based approaches. I'll leave the second horn aside as neither Phillips nor most other philosophers try to justify basic equality with a transcendental basis.

What it meant with **a)** is that most natural capacities that we use to ground basic equality have effects outside ethics.¹⁶ E.g. high-end cognitive abilities are important outside ethics. Alternatively, sympathy – something we usually feel when someone is in a pitiful situation they don't deserve to be in – can occur even without a moral reason to feel so. E.g. imagine someone that has been sentenced to death and must now wait in pitiful conditions while being unable to see their loved ones until it's time for their execution. No doubt, we can think that they're guilty and deserve to be in this situation as they've done a horrendous crime. Nonetheless, we might still feel sympathy for them for having to spend their last moments like this.

What is meant with **b)** boils down to the issue that most properties are scalar, i.e. they're held to varying degrees among us. E.g. if rational beings (like humans) have more moral value than non-rational beings (like worms) then it stands to reason that highly rational beings (like physicists) have more moral value than less rational beings (like cognitively impaired people). These natural inequalities risk creating hierarchical structures.¹⁷ Many have tried to circumvent the problem with range properties. In short: *'A range property is a binary property: it is either*

¹³ Cf. ARNESON 2015 for a general analysis of the several issues applying to basic equality at large. Cf. KILLMISTER 2022 for a list of issues applying to relational accounts.

¹⁴ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 41, 51, 53, 56f.

¹⁵ This dilemma was initially posed by Williams (WILLIAMS 2005, pp. 101f.) and later refurbished by Carter (CARTER 2011, p. 544).

¹⁶ WILLIAMS 2005, p. 101.

¹⁷ KILLMISTER 2022, p. 4.

*possessed or not possessed. To possess a range property is to possess some other scalar property, within a specified range.*¹⁸ However, justifying the use of a range property over its underlying scalar property has proven difficult.¹⁹ Thus, **b**) is best understood as another dilemma: Either **i**) the property is scalar, i.e. varies by degrees, and thus leaves space for claims of unequal moral considerability, or **ii**) the property is binary but will then be too flimsy or insubstantial to justify equal moral considerability.²⁰

Phillips is mainly concerned with problems like these as it seems like a search for the ‘philosopher’s stone’ – or rather ‘philosopher’s condition’. Egalitarians come up with the most ingenious solutions to just fail anyway. To Phillips, the most convincing accounts are those that try to be the least intrusive and just stop at aspects like dignity and mutual respect. They effectively come close to just abandoning the whole search for properties altogether.²¹

There’s a third and final problem concerning exclusions which culminates from the first two problems. It’s these exclusions that Phillips believes to be the most problematic thing about conditionality.²² Here’s the outline: First, a property must be narrowly defined, i.e. be significant enough so that it’s justified as the basis of equality. If the property is e.g. the capacity to form close attachments to others then it would include other species beyond humans. Second, a property must be widely defined, i.e. held among every member of the group of equals. If the property is e.g. an intimate understanding of highly abstract moral issues then many would fall short as not everyone is trained in ethics. This clash of narrowness and wideness leads to exclusions which aren’t just theoretical issues but actual practical dangers. All the exclusions made throughout history and in current times stem from people with power and influence that defined basic equality in the context of their desired human qualities. Thus, one’s equal status becomes hostage to fortune. It’s this practical danger that is Phillips’ core issue with conditionality. These exclusions become even more dangerous as history isn’t a progression of improvements as some claim – we can and have relapsed. Equality can’t be taken for granted.

¹⁸ CARTER 2011, p. 548. For an in-depth explanation of a *range property*, cf. CARTER 2011, pp. 548-50 or RAWLS 1999, p. 443.

¹⁹ Even Carter’s most ingenious account has successfully been critiqued by Arneson. Cf. ARNESON 2015, pp. 47f. for a more in-depth critique. Another critique is the one made by (WALDRON 2017, pp. 171f).

²⁰ ARNESON 2015, p. 42

²¹ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 46, 48.

²² This paragraph is based on: KILLMISTER 2022, pp. 3f. and PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 3f., 18-39, 51, 56.

Having established the problems of conditionality, we can next look at why unconditionality is, as Phillips argues, a necessity for equality. Simply put: the longer we look for this ‘philosopher’s condition’ and don’t find it, the harder it becomes to accept that we truly are equals.²³ Giving up would equate to giving up on basic equality at large. Justification doesn’t just lead to exclusions but also ‘*gives reason to acknowledge that equality is doubtful*’.²⁴ Finally, Phillips sees one final core issue looming over conditionality. Just because one believes that all humans are equals, it won’t *make* everyone equal. Philosophers spend too much time and energy searching for the basis of equality but neglect the inequalities that are on the rise.²⁵ Equality requires action which conditionality doesn’t provide.²⁶ The strength of unconditionality is that it does ask us to act by committing to and asserting equality.²⁷

From the above, it should’ve become clear that **I**) conditionality’s biggest issue is that it leads to exclusions and that **II**) conditionality is too far removed from actual politics to help in the pursuit of making our world an equal place and, thus, unconditionality’s activeness becomes a necessity for egalitarians.

²³ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 48

²⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 1, 12f., 83.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 51, 54.

²⁷ LIVINGSTONE SMITH 2022, pp. 1f.

3. PROBLEMS OF UNCONDITIONAL BASIC EQUALITY

3.1. THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

I'll first consider a dilemma concerning unconditionality's theoretical generality.²⁸ Namely, if **a**) the point of unconditionality is that we're all humans then what does equality add to the political debate? And thus **b**), how much, if any, normative power has unconditionality? Furthermore, if **a**) is reformulated, a different issue to this dilemma becomes apparent:²⁹ Either **a**) equality is taken too weak so that it merely states that all humans are human, or **c**) equality is taken too strong so that have to treated equal in all matters. Regarding **c**), Phillips is clear that equality can't mean that we should treat everybody exactly alike.³⁰ Lastly **b**), the argument for a lack of equality's normative pressure, reminds me of some philosophers' assertions which effectively claim equality to be empty.³¹ That unconditionality evokes such claims this easily, is alarming. I'll return to this issue of theoretical generality in **3.2.** when talking about the vagueness of Phillips' approach which is a direct consequence of this generality.³²

Having established this issue of generality, I'll now consider a more immediate theoretical problem regarding reflection.³³ As *reflective* and *reasonable* beings, we can't just ignore theoretical problems in the name of achieving equality. While we needn't explain which condition grounds equality, we still need to reflect on other matters of egalitarianism. Unconditionality, however, asks us to evade certain reflective questions:

[Why] do we [...] make this kind of claim and commitment in this sort of way, and what are we doing when we do so? [Why] should others be expected to agree with us, and what are we going to say [...] if they don't? ³⁴

Most unfortunately, if we're claiming to be reflective and reasonable agents, the answer to the question 'Why are we equal?' can't be 'just because' which unconditionality effectively claims.

However, just because Phillips doesn't reflect upon unconditionality's implications that doesn't mean that we can't. For this, I'll return to Arneson's predecessor of unconditionality.³⁵ In his portrayal, we begin with the idea that we should seek equal relationships with others. For this, we need to figure out '*what it is to treat people as equals*' so we know why we should give our allegiance to unconditionality. First, it stands to reason that every equal relationship is

²⁸ This issue was first noted by Bejan. Cf. BEJAN 2022, p. 8.

²⁹ This dilemma was first posed by Williams. Cf. WILLIAMS 2005, p. 97.

³⁰ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 41f.

³¹ BEJAN 2022, p. 8.

³² See pp. 10f.

³³ The following paragraph is based on SAGAR 2022, p. 358.

³⁴ SAGAR 2022, p. 358.

³⁵ The next two paragraphs are based on ARNESON 2015, p. 48f. For the introduction to Arneson's idea, see p. 4.

instrumentally good, and every unequal relationship is instrumentally bad: Hierarchical structures can do wonders for the discipline and organization of large groups like e.g. militaries. It thus follows that unconditionality is a *hypothetical* imperative. Second, the moment that the original imperative to seek equality is no more achievable, we're left with no reason to further pursue it – thus, unconditionality is also a *contingent* imperative. This contingency is especially bad for unconditionality as most conditions aren't subject to change. I'll return to this issue of contingency in 3.3. when discussing a problem of fluctuation regarding the commitment that is a direct consequence of this contingency.³⁶

So, it seems that unconditionality is a *contingent* and *hypothetical* imperative to seek equality. Arneson states poignantly that '*[t]reating people as equals should be derived as [a non-contingent] moral requirement*'. In addition to these two highly problematic issues, there's one third and final problem. What exactly does this imperative to seek equality look like? Is it one of prudence, one to improve our lives, or one due to morality? If it's the latter, then we seem to row back to a morally based condition which we want to avoid. A reminder: Conditionality can also occur when equality is conditional on the achievement of a different issue.³⁷ This is the case here, as an imperative of prudence or instrumentality lets our motivation for seeking equality become conditional on the motivation for this imperative. So, it turns out that unconditionality under reflective deliberation ends up being conditional all along.

To sum up: unconditionality is just as much a theoretical cocktail of poisons as conditionality: It operates on the premise that we want equality, so as reflective and reasonable agents we must ask why we want that; upon reflection, we must conclude that unconditionality is a *contingent* and *conditional hypothetical* imperative. A dilemma occurs: Equality can only be unconditional if we don't reflect upon it: But, if we're not reflective, then we're not reasonable. So, either unconditional basic equality is conditional, or it is unreasonable and unreflective.

I hope that I've made my theoretical concerns clear. But, as stated before, Phillips is only concerned with practice. Even if unconditionality harbours theoretical poisons, so does conditionality. Thus, the theoretical problems won't affect her too much when we actively commit to equality and make it happen. However, building on these two theoretical issues, the next two subsections will illustrate that, issues of theory will either directly or indirectly through a divisional problem cause issues in practice. I'll next move on to the divisional problems that occur because of unconditionality's focus on practice and its sacrifice of theory.

³⁶ See pp. 13f.

³⁷ See p. 3 and footnote 9.

3.2. DIVISIONAL PROBLEMS

Maybe unsurprisingly, the theory that is used to ground basic equality has direct implications for the normative and applied aspects of egalitarianism, i.e. its practical realm. This is because basic equality's grounding condition restricts how certain aspects of normative and applied equality can be structured.³⁸ First, there's the *scope* of equality, so *to whom* equal treatment is owed;³⁹ second, there's the *site* of equality, i.e. *which* principles of justice (*judicanda*) offer measures for judging the actions of equals; and third, there's the *currency* of equality, so *what* good (*equalizanda*) has to be equalized.⁴⁰ Now, unconditional basic equality is a call to action but doesn't prescribe how.⁴¹ This vagueness is intentional by Phillips, but, I'd argue, it's also a necessity of unconditionality's nature. In the following, I'll first recap Phillips' vagueness regarding *site* and *currency*⁴² and then return to how unconditionality makes our lives harder because of its implicated vagueness. The reader is reminded that this issue of vagueness is a direct consequence of unconditionality's theoretical generality.⁴³

Let's first turn to *currency*. Phillips states that equality means both equality of material resources *and* status.⁴⁴ Now, this is less so a direct definition of currency and more so a union of distributive and relational egalitarian ideas.⁴⁵ While I agree that indulging both relational and distributive accounts, depicts equality much better, this has the consequence that unconditionality has two unrestricted currencies. The only thing that Phillips 'restricts' is that inequalities beyond sufficiency do matter and, thus, insured economic sufficiency isn't enough to get rid of inequalities at large.⁴⁶ This, I believe, is a restriction of the *site* of equality and not its currency. Regarding the *site*, Phillips makes it clear that she isn't too concerned with not giving any further principles. She prefers it to stay vague because she worries that too prescriptive principles might become another condition.⁴⁷ What she does offer is a guiding method: We ought to look to those that are oppressed, find inequalities, and not define equality.⁴⁸ Now, Phillips recognizes that what one defines as inequality, oppression etc. will vary from one person to the other, but

³⁸ For an in-depth explanation discussion of basic equality's implications on those three aspects, cf. CARTER 2023 for *scope*, cf. CARTER 2013 for *site*, and cf. CARTER 2011, pp. 543, 560-71 for *currency*.

³⁹ This is the most obvious of all cases and is usually the centre of debate when discussing (basic) equality.

⁴⁰ CARTER 2013, p. 22.

⁴¹ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 86-111.

⁴² The *scope* of equality might invoke an issue of speciesism, though this would be at best a weak theoretical problem. Because Phillips' approach is so common-sensical (PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 60-2), she can circumvent such issues simply because no other earthly species compare to humans. Hypotheticals can arise when we ask, '*What if there were other comparable species?*' but as this isn't a current concern, it won't concern Phillips either.

⁴³ See p. 8.

⁴⁴ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 92.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

she's ready to let that slide if the most egregious inequalities can subsequently be eliminated.⁴⁹ First, while the vagueness of this method avoids overly restricting prescriptions, it in turn leads to overly individual commitments to equality. One's commitment can vary just as much as one's definitions of oppression etc. Second, a method isn't a principle. This distinction is important because it's principles that legitimize our actions⁵⁰ – a method can't. If we can't defend our actions, then how will we convince others to commit to equality? I'll return to this question in **3.3**. when discussing an issue of convincing.⁵¹

Lastly, Phillips' initial premise presents a conundrum for academic egalitarianism. Unconditionality's vagueness displays the strategic evasion of difficult questions. Equality has several conceptual difficulties that political philosophy has never managed to truly solve and maybe shouldn't be expected to.⁵² However, if this evasion proves to be successful, it begs the question of what other egalitarian (maybe even general political) issues we can solve by neglecting theoretical debates in favour of committing to political activeness. If there doesn't exist an equalizing property, then perhaps there are also no solutions to other problems. Unconditionally sets a precedent that seems to defeat the practical purpose of political philosophy and questions its relevancy. Why do academic work when only our political engagement matters? I refuse to believe that all problems of political philosophy can be solved by committing to politics.

After having presented these divisional problems, it's worth mentioning that they're less so death sentences to unconditionality but more so make our lives harder than they need to be. Having said that, I'll drop these divisional problems too as they're still partially theoretical. In the last subsection, I shall focus only on what matters to Phillips: the practical realm. Frankly, if it weren't for the following practical problems, unconditionality would have a strong case against conditionality. Phillips is justified in sacrificing theory in turn to achieve equality. However, unconditionality still harbours too many poisons in its sole intended plan of effect and, therefore, simply can't replace conditionality.

⁴⁹ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 111.

⁵⁰ BEJAN 2022, p. 12.

⁵¹ See pp. 13f.

⁵² BEJAN 2022, p. 12.

3.3. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

This final subsection provides a discussion of two practical problems that both are the consequence of already discussed issues. I'll first discuss a problem of fluctuation regarding the commitment to equality itself. This issue stems from unconditionality being a contingent imperative which I concluded while discussing the theoretical issue of reflection.⁵³ Secondly, I'll discuss the problem of lacking the power to convince others to commit to equality. This problem is the consequence of the issue of theoretical generality and the issue of vagueness.⁵⁴

The first aspect of the issue of fluctuation is that one's commitment to equality can fluctuate, in the sense that one can change their mind. Just as I can be convinced to seek equality, so can I be convinced of the opposite. Think of the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War: At first, they were willing to treat their allies as equals in all legal matters. They didn't need to do this, but they believed it to be the just thing to do. During the height of the war, things were different. It suits them no more to treat others as their equals when they aren't. What matters is power, and only those who are equally powerful are their legal equals. Now, of course, this change in power ideology is implied as a corruption of power politics – nobody would claim that it's a good change.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it shows how one can change their commitment solely because equality is of no use to them no more – it's a contingent imperative. A more recent development that comes to my mind is the steady advance of far-right parties in Europe. Parties like the AfD in Germany, the PiS in Poland, the Fidesz in Hungary, the FdI and Lega in Italy, the FN in France, and the SD in Sweden: most of them stand opposed to the Idea of European unity, LGBTQIA+ rights, migrants, and issues like women's rights or universal healthcare usually aren't high on their priority-lists. Another development would be the anti-feminist movement among younger men, propelled by influencers like Andrew Tate. Women were only so long equal to men as they didn't get well-paying jobs, high-ranking political positions etc. Both developments are intergenerational changes in society's imperative to seek equality.

This leads me to the second aspect of the issue of fluctuation – what can be asserted can be taken away. Phillips notes this as well but sees it as a general problem of equality. For her, it's yet another reminder that equality must be thought of as a commitment that fades once you stop committing.⁵⁶ I think she's partly right: equality as a political idea needs commitment if we are

⁵³ See pp. 8f.

⁵⁴ For the issue of theoretical generality, see p. 8. For the issue of vagueness, see pp. 10f.

⁵⁵ This example is part of the much bigger debate around Thucydidean realism. A book that I'd recommend to further delve into the subject is by STOCKHAMMER, NICOLAS: *Das Prinzip der Macht. Die Rationalität politischer Macht bei Thukydides, Machiavelli und Michael Foucaults*, Baden 2009.

⁵⁶ PHILLIPS 2021, pp. 83f.

to achieve it. But politics is inextricably linked to culture, social norms, and even language (think of the 'gendering debate' in German academia). Equality is in a constant state of flux. Thus, yes, a constant commitment is required, *but* unconditional equality only calls for us to claim, assert and commit but not why or how. When equality becomes exclusively political, it's also exclusively subject to political forces.⁵⁷ This wouldn't be an issue if unconditionality was strong enough to counter these forces – but it isn't. Equality requires more than a call to action to persist in politics – something like a philosophical justification that grounds equality outside of politics and makes it non-contingent. It might be wrong to take away people's rights, privileges etc. but as long as we don't have a reason why that is so, we can't defend ourselves. We can't convince others to commit to equality.

Building from this second aspect of fluctuation, this section will now fully illustrate the issue of convincing others. I've already asserted that when we don't have principles to guide our commitment to equality, then we don't have an effective way to convince others to do so too.⁵⁸ Let's set aside that this vagueness can be problematic for those that have committed to equality and work under the premise that it works how Phillips envisaged it – what about everyone else that hasn't committed? Principles help defend our actions and justify them to others. That's why racism and sexism are so inexcusable – they're unjustified.⁵⁹ If equality has no (philosophical) ground to stand on, then it loses its vital convincing power. That's what would make a successful condition for equality so valuable – it's undeniable and thus demands us to be equal. Phillips is concerned with offering a reason based on similarities when justifying equality to a sexist or racist because she believes that it would then acknowledge equality's dubitability.⁶⁰ But I disagree: When engaging in a 'debate' that is held outside a rational frame and in ill faith, there's nothing one can do – a reasonable justification is just as good as the answer 'just because'.⁶¹ One couldn't acknowledge equality's dubitability even if one wanted. But outside these debates, in a rational environment of serious deliberation, to justify and ground equality isn't acknowledging its dubitability but it's to engage in a political and philosophical debate.

⁵⁷ This Idea is inspired by Killmister's modal fragility objection. Cf. KILLMISTER 2022, pp. 14f.

⁵⁸ See p. 11

⁵⁹ Of course, They're also problematic because they severely harm the affected people, but humanity has harmed people when it had reasons to do so. World War II against the Nazis led to many people having to suffer, many of whom weren't Nazis or cooperated with them. Yet, few would argue that the Allied war effort was unjust.

⁶⁰ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 56.

⁶¹ SAGAR 2022, p. 358.

I mentioned this issue as the last because even Phillips seems to be aware of it when she says that she '*do[es] not anticipate winning over those who actively oppose equality*'.⁶² This is what seems most decisive to me because I agree with her that egalitarians haven't been doing enough recently. But even if all egalitarians would come together and act, we're still fighting against people that stand opposed – people that might hold their power because of their opposition. How can we expect things to change when we can't convince them? With force? *Unconditional Equals* is a powerful call to action for egalitarians and brings together many problems of equality at large. However, unconditionality can't give us anything to work with to effectively assert our equality against the people that withhold it from us. Basic equality as a political justification was never about justifying equality to egalitarians but to those that oppose it. Thus, unconditionality denies equality both a philosophical and a political justification.

⁶² PHILLIPS 2021, p. 13.

4. CONCLUSION

I've started this paper by defining basic equality, conditionality, and unconditionality. After that, I've presented some main problems of conditionality. The conclusion was that Phillips' main issue with conditionality is that it leads to exclusions. Building from this, unconditionality is, according to Phillips, a necessary replacement for conditionality because it requires us to commit to and assert our equality. I then moved on to presenting my main concerns with unconditionality. I've first shown two theoretical problems – one of *generality* and one of *reflection*. But, as Phillips argues against theoretical justification in favour of practical action, I was willing to tolerate these issues as poisons of basic equality and move on. However, this essay has shown that these theoretical issues affect the practical realm as well because theory and practice are intimately connected with one another. This became apparent when I presented the divisional problems of *vagueness* and a *conundrum* for political philosophy. However, as these are still problems born from theory, I was willing to sacrifice them as further poisons if there were no practical problems. Finally, I've presented two practical problems – one of *fluctuating* commitments and one of *convincing* those that are opposed to equality. By having shown these last two issues, I've had to conclude that unconditionality isn't just as problematic as conditionality. Moreover, it can under no circumstances be a replacement for conditionality when it struggles on its sole intended plane of effect while demanding to overlook so many other issues.

Nonetheless, Phillips makes many just criticisms and points to serious issues of inactivity and exclusions of equality philosophy. In the end, unconditionality makes the mistake of over-correcting a hyper-fixation of theory to one of practice, effectively, dividing theory and practice in the process. Phillips' approach thus becomes the antithesis of its predecessors. I propose a synthesis of both: Yes, '*equality is something people make happen when they refuse to accept the status of inferiors. Equality is a commitment and a claim*'.⁶³ But equality is also so much more. In order to fully understand and assert our equality, it needs more than demanding egalitarians to *commit* to the cause, we also need to ask *why*. To *assert* equality among everyone, we're required to try to convince others in a way that they can't deny our equality unless they are being unreasonable. By doing this, theory can be embedded into practice. Then, equality is a political commitment and a philosophical justification. They both motivate and ground each other. Equality requires both.

⁶³ PHILLIPS 2021, p. 112.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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