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Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*

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Faghfour Azar, L.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human*

Leila Faghfour Azar

Anne Phillips (2015), *The Politics of the Human*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, viii+150 pp, ISBN: 978-1107475830

In *The Politics of the Human*, Anne Phillips develops a political account in which the human is understood through her particular differences; an account which is neither humanist nor foundationalist. This book basically relies on the lectures she delivered in the John Robert Seeley Series at Cambridge in 2013. A major part of this book revolves around criticizing those conceptions of common humanity that go beyond or beneath human particularities including gender, race, color, and so on. The significance attached to the notion of the human, as she puts it, pertains to its central role in three prevailing contemporary politico-ethical discourses: human rights, global justice, and humanitarianism. In order to critically reflect on these discourses, she criticizes the way the human is understood in them. Firstly, she challenges what she calls an 'abstract' or 'content-less' understanding of the human. The human, on this view, is understood based on the idea of commonality and some shared essentially human characteristics, which is a powerful ethical idea enforced by the universal human rights discourse. Nevertheless, this conception's shortcoming reveals when we invoke some qualifications such as rationality, empathy, or considering the human as a political animal to substantiate this common humanity. As soon as we understand the common humanity on these grounds, some groups of people are considered to be excluded from this category due to not being able to exhibit these qualifications to some extent.

Secondly, Phillips criticizes the 'substantive' or 'content-overloaded' understanding of the human. On this account, the human is conceived of on the ground of a kind of co-humanity, despite the differences that people carry in regard to their gender, color, race, etc. In this framework, the notion of the human, in one sense, is interchangeable with equality. The human, as understood in this manner, is mostly central to cosmopolitan projects of global justice, which, according to Phillips, are 'in some ways an amalgam of humanitarianism and human rights' (p. 4). This discourse employs justice-based arguments in order to convince those who are securely established in their enjoyment of equality and rights to support vulnerable others in the name of a shared humanity. However, Phillips believes this argumentation dissuades people to challenge hierarchies and their corresponding violence, because it sees differences and particularities to be less significant than the general demand for justice. The third account of the human, as approached in humanitarianism, is also associated with equality. Viewed from this standpoint,

those who are more privileged and have more fortune should act on behalf of less privileged people in order to serve humanity. Phillips argues that stipulating an obligation of one part of humanity to another part of humanity, even if involving the notion of equality, is very close to ideas of charity and compassion. Although it is not the intention, acting on behalf of those who are not (yet) equal might end up with confirming what humanitarianism asserts to fight against: hierarchies, inequalities, and power-relations.

Phillips' critique of humanitarianism is closely linked to her critique of Rorty's anti-foundationalism, presented in chapter 3. She believes that the implementation of justice by those who are privileged out of empathy disregards what is most radical in the notion of the human: claiming equality by those who have been denied equality on the basis of the claim that they are on a same fully equal standing. Acting on behalf of the other out of empathy, Phillips contends, reflects a non-political understanding of the human. This leads her to discuss Arendt's anti-foundationalism, which though reliable to some extent, is still contestable. Phillips basically tackles Arendt's narrow understanding of politics. This narrowness is rooted in an unclear distinction that Arendt draws between the political and the social, according to which the only form of community through which equality could be established is a political community. Phillips argues that this understanding of the political overlooks the important role of social differences in claiming equality against the political community (which has denied the equality of certain groups of people). This criticism gives rise to what is at the heart of Phillips' account on the human: the claim to be recognized as equal, and the commitment to recognize each other as equal within and against the political community (p. 78).

But what does it mean to consider the claim and commitment to equality as central in understanding the human? To address this question, Phillips engages in a critical reading of different understandings of human dignity in different discourses, since she sees this as one major challenge to her argument on the political understanding of the human. Phillips argues that dignity, most often, is just another way of theorizing what it means to treat others as equals. Theories of human dignity that go beyond this will engage with offering a substantive idea about what it is to be human, which should be avoided in her view. Therefore, instead of referring to a substantial characteristic, it is better to rely on equality, both as a claim and as commitment. Equality, in terms of the right to be regarded as an equal member of the category of the human, is neither a matter of justification nor an empirical claim. Phillips believes that detaching the notion of the human from what it *essentially* means to be human would protect us from distinguishing humans on the ground of their cognitive capacities. This would also protect us from making sentimental, non-political claims. In addition, a more claim-based account of what it means to be human moves the attention from those who are at the moment secure in the status of being equal to those who are still about to achieve it. The politics of the human which understands equality in terms of

the human's claim and commitment would have a greater political force than the politics in which equality is seen as what should be given to the human.

Phillips devotes the final chapter of this book to discuss her position's distance from discourses on humanism and post-humanism in order to substantiate her equality-claim based understanding of the human. Although critical of both discourses, Phillips argues that her position is neither anti-humanist nor post-humanist. She is critical of humanism, basically because this discourse's essentialist approach to understanding the human moves the focus away from particularities and differences in understanding what the human is. Besides, she argues that post-humanism, ranging from an oversimplified anti-humanism to more complex versions, will potentially decrease the central role and importance of equality and the politics of the human.

Some scholars affirm that *The Politics of the Human* is a significant contribution to set political theory free from the search for foundation(s). I also believe it is a valuable contribution to the contemporary literature on emancipatory politics, the politics of difference, and the politics of inclusion. This, of course, has advantages, especially when it comes to issues and questions regarding contemporary human crises on a normative level. However, I am still skeptical about taking the move to normative accounts in politics without having addressed questions on grounding and definition. Phillips attempts to offer a normative account of the human, which is substantiated by the concept of equality. And equality, according to her, is not founded on anything, and therefore, there is no need to prove or justify it. Equality, on this view, is taken as a central and predominant value. But before turning to defend and substantiate the politics of the human in terms of a claim and commitment to equality, she needs to clarify *who* this human is. For she will always be asked about this human who is supposed to claim and be committed to equality. Phillips' only reflection with regard to this question, which is not very easy to be grasped from the lines of her argument, suggests that the human is the one who has the capacity to (at least initially) recognize herself and others as equal. In other words, the capacity to recognize humans as equal is the condition to be considered as human. Here, I think, Phillips is defining the human in a way she herself is critical of. For this defining condition sets limits on membership of the category of the human as long as we could imagine (and introduce examples) of people who cannot exhibit this capacity. Yet, Phillips' political account of the human and equality is supposed to offer a framework of the politics of the human which is free from exclusionary and essentialist characteristics in defining the human. For that reason, one could raise the question how her politics of the human would locate groups of people who cannot/do not exhibit the capacity to recognize humans as equal within the realm of politics.