Equality as a pre-requisite for judgment: defending Hannah Arendt on egalitarianism

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Hannah Arendt’s thought on equality is controversial and sometimes misunderstood. Her objection to ‘modern equality’ which involves conformity in society, rather than distinction in the polis, along with her praise of the political equality, founded on extreme elitism and slavery, of ancient Greece, lead many to the conclusion that she is, at minimum, not particularly egalitarian or, at maximum, even against equality. However, Arendtian politics is founded upon the faculty of judgment. Despite the fact that she did not live to complete a volume of The Life of the Mind on this faculty, Arendt discusses judgment at several points in her work. Judgment involves the combination of πείθειν – convincing and persuasive speech – and φρόνησις – the ability to see things from many perspectives, which Kant glosses as an ‘enlarged mentality’. Πείθειν, with its non-violent and wooing nature, is fundamentally egalitarian; it cannot, by definition, make use of coercion. Φρόνησις welcomes the deployment of as many differing standpoints and views as possible; the greater the plurality (rather than conformity), the greater the quality, and legitimacy, of the judgment. Thus, Arendt’s political theory, based on judgment, requires as wide a spread of equality as possible.

This paper argues that Hannah Arendt’s political theory is more egalitarian, and less elitist, than many have argued. Although Arendt writes much which leaves her susceptible to charges of elitism or even plain snobbery, in particular her disdain for ‘mass man’ and ‘mass society’, her dislike of ‘modern equality’ and her praise for the political system of Ancient Greece which was made possible only through slavery, such charges do not stick. Rather, as this paper argues, an analysis of Arendt’s work on judgment shows just how important equality is for Arendtian politics. Although Arendt did not live to complete the third volume of The Life of the Mind, which was to discuss judgment at length, following volumes treating Thinking and Willing, her many published works, as well as lecture notes and her Denktagebuch (‘thinking diary’), provide us with a trail of clues as to her theory of judgment and its role in politics. Judgment, as we shall see, requires not just equality, but, ideally, the participation of as many as possible, and thus the spread of equality as widely as possible – equality for the many, not just for the few.

Attempts have been made to defend Arendt in terms of egalitarianism before, notably by Jeremy Waldron. However, this paper goes further. Rather than arguing, as Waldron does, that Arendt’s political theory is egalitarian but allows for a certain proportion of people to ‘self-select’ themselves as an elite who take part in politics, this paper argues that Arendt’s political theory demands that as many people as possible participate in judgment: the greater

1 Jeremy Waldron, “Arendt on the foundations of equality”, in Seyla Benhabib (Ed.), Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hanna Pitkin notes that ‘Arendt’s views on the relationship between politics and economics are much misunderstood but also very obscure. She is not a liberal in the sense of believing that political equality justifies economic inequality or that it is wholly independent of citizens’ economic status. She is a critic both of the laissez-faire market and of an administered economy – communist, socialist, or welfare. But she never really specifies a viable alternative.’ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 322, n.17
the plurality of viewpoints, the higher the quality of the judgment will be; furthermore, faced with being forced to be free, we have a responsibility to respond to this freedom by judging – failure to do this made the brutal totalitarianism and genocide of the twentieth century possible.

Canovan suggests that there are serious inconsistencies between ‘what may for the sake of brevity be called Arendt’s elitist and her democratic aspects’. Whilst on the one hand, Arendt praises the ideal Greek agora of free and equal citizens, on the other hand, ‘she attributes totalitarianism largely to the rise of ‘mass society’; she expresses contempt not only for the activity of labouring but for the characteristic tastes and dispositions of labourers; and she shows what is, for a modern political thinker, a truly astonishing lack of interest in the social and economic welfare of the many, except in so far as the struggle to achieve it poses a threat to the freedom of the few.’

Canovan argues that this inconsistency results at least in part from Arendt’s reaction to the changing politics of the twentieth century: ‘the political changes of her time led her from a deep distrust of the modern masses (entirely justified in view of her experiences as a Jew in Germany), complemented by the dream of an elitist utopia, toward a greatly increased faith in the people and their political capacities, and a greater willingness to see political action as something that happens in the present, not just in the utopian past.’ In other words, Arendt was, perhaps, in the process of being won over to a less elitist, more democratic and egalitarian approach. It is possible that the last volume of The Life of the Mind, Judging, would have confirmed this shift – this paper argues that it is Arendt’s work on judging in particular that demonstrates a distinct egalitarianism in her work. However, this paper argues that there is no such inconsistency in Arendt’s work of the types Canovan and Brunkhorst identify. Rather than seeing Arendt as a case of an elitist being gradually won over to egalitarianism, this paper argues that a commitment to equality, bound up inextricably with politics and judgment, runs throughout Arendt’s work.

This paper will be split into two sections. The first section seeks to respond directly to those critics of Arendt who see her political theory as anti-egalitarian or elitist. This first section will be split further into two, considering first the problems associated with Arendt’s thought on the Ancients, in particular the Greek polis, before considering the problems associated with Arendt’s thought on the Moderns, in particular her commentary on the French Revolution and on ‘mass society’.

The second section of the paper will examine Arendt’s work on judgment and its links with egalitarianism, and will be split into three parts. The first part considers the radically egalitarian implications of πείθειν (persuasion); the second considers φρόνησις and the importance of multiple perspectives and plurality; the third considers Augustine, archein and the form of the political community, and argues that there need not be a contradiction between the Augustinian and the Republican aspects of Arendt’s thought – in the equal human capacity to begin lies the possibility of the establishment of the Republic.

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3 Canovan, “The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt’s Political Thought”, p. 23
1. Arendt as an anti-egalitarian elitist

1.1 Arendt and the Moderns

There are four main aspects of Arendt’s treatment of ‘modern’ politics which have led commentators to suggest that she is elitist, or, at minimum, in no way an egalitarian. These are, first, her discussion of ‘modern equality’; second, her writings concerning ‘the social’, ‘the mob’, mass society, and ‘mass man’; third, her discussion of the French revolution and the politics of need; and, fourth, her general silence on economic matters. This section will consider these aspects in turn, in each case arguing that Arendt is less elitist than is claimed.

1.1.1 Modern Equality

For Arendt, ‘modern equality’ is the result of the ‘rise of the social’ and its displacement of the political. Unlike the equality of the ancient polis, modern equality is ‘based on the conformism inherent in society’ – here, ‘society’ is the opposite to the public sphere, the area of the political; it is simply the expansion of the oikia, the household, in which political action is impossible. The equality of the household and of society – ‘modern equality’ – is not the equality of peers, homoioi, in the public realm, which is characterised by the seeking after distinction, and the attempt ‘to show through unique deeds’ that one is ‘the best of all (aien aristeuein), and ‘a fiercely agonal spirit’. Rather, such modern equality ‘resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head’ and enforces conformity so that economics replace ethics and politics, and ‘those who [do] not keep [to] the [statistical and economic] rules [are] considered to be asocial or abnormal’. Modern equality, then, is antithetical to freedom, and is more akin to conformism in a state of domination.

Taken at face value, aspects of Arendt’s criticism of ‘modern equality’, sketched only very briefly here, could be taken to be a criticism of equality per se, as tending to promote conformism, which is undesirable as it leads to people giving up the pursuit of doing great and unique deeds. However, as her discussion of ancient equality makes clear, it is specifically modern equality with which Arendt takes issue. Furthermore, what is problematic about modern equality is that it is the expression of a process by which the social has, argues Arendt, displaced the political. Equality does not have to imply conformity, it is

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6 HC, p. 40
7 HC, p. 42
8 HC, p. 39-41
9 HC, pp. 32-3, p. 41; OR, p. 23; OT, p. 301
10 HC, pp. 38-49
just that, in Arendt’s view, the equality characterising the modern world does, because of its roots in the social. Were a new or alternative public realm to be constructed, in which politics and freedom are possible, then there would be nothing wrong with the equality pertaining to this public realm, as it allows for distinction, politics, and freedom; indeed, as we shall see later, equality is a pre-requisite for these. The fact that Arendt considers ‘modern equality’ to be a bad thing does not mean that equality in general is undesirable: rather, we must be clearer in what we mean by equality, and more sophisticated in our analysis of what equality involves and how it arises.

1.1.2 Mass Society

In ‘The Crisis in Culture’ Arendt discusses what she sees as the regrettable effects of mass society and mass culture. In society, cultural objects ‘lost the faculty which is originally peculiar to all cultural things, the faculty of arresting our attention and moving us’. At first cultural items became simply a currency by which ‘the philistine’ could gain a higher social position. Later, mass society demanded entertainment rather than culture, simply to while away the time. Mass society, then, is characterised by its transformation of culture into currency and by its use of what would otherwise be leisure time: rather than using this time to participate in politics in the sense of public life and discussion, and attempting great acts and memorable deeds, mass society demands entertainment which is consumed precisely to fill up this ‘vacant time’.

At first glance, this could appear to be sheer snobbery – someone fortunate enough to enjoy high society and high culture dismissing the society and culture of those less fortunate. However, this reading would be to misunderstand Arendt’s point. The point is not that mass society is a bad thing; rather it is mass society which is bad. This is in need of amplification. Arendt writes: ‘mass society and mass culture seem to be interrelated phenomena, but their common denominator is not the mass but rather the society into which the masses too have been incorporated.’ It is not the fact of masses which is bad, but the fact that the masses have been incorporated into society. This, too, sounds bad on first reading. Arendt’s point is not that the masses should be shunned from society; rather, her point is that society – the social – is bad. For all the traits that are deplored in ‘mass man’ ‘his loneliness – and loneliness is neither isolation nor solitude – regardless of his adaptibility; his excitability and lack of standards; his capacity for consumption, accompanied by inability to judge, or even to distinguish; above all, his egocentricity and that fateful alienation from the world which since Rousseau is mistaken for self-alienation’ are traits not linked to the masses but to society: ‘all these traits first appeared in good society, where there was no question of masses, numerically speaking.’ Mass society is not bad because it is mass, it is bad because the masses have taken on the form of the social, and not the political. Indeed, the seeds of all that Arendt holds to be wrong with mass society were sown, she argues, in the elite court society of Louis XIV. Here, in order to

12 CC, p. 195
13 CC, p. 196
‘reduce French nobility to political insignificance’, Louis gathered them all to Versailles, transformed them into courtiers, and made them ‘entertain one another through the intrigues, cabals, and endless gossip which this perpetual party inevitably engendered’. Real, yet trivial, life provided the forerunner of the penny dreadful, the B-movie, the endless soap opera or reality television in filling up ‘vacant time’, which could be devoted to the political, with entertainment.

1.1.3 The French Revolution and the Politics of Need

Arendt’s stance on the French Revolution, particularly in comparison with the American Revolution, is potentially problematic for anyone attempting to claim Arendt for egalitarianism. Arendt is highly critical of the French Revolution, especially critical of the way in which it was influenced by the masses of poverty-stricken people, and of the fact that it attempted not to promote liberty, but to solve the ‘social question’ and tackle poverty instead. Such criticism of an attempt to alleviate the situation of the poor does not sit well with egalitarianism, and smacks of elitism in the way in which it seems to put political liberty above the every-day, real concerns of those who struggle to find enough bread to eat. Her analysis of the American Revolution, with which she has much more sympathy, despite the continuing existence of systematic slavery before and after the revolution, adds to the impression that Arendt might be more occupied with notions of abstract political freedom for the few than she is with the real lives of the many: in short, she is at best a myopic idealist and at worst an uncaring elitist. Despite these possible initial reactions, this section will attempt to defend Arendt on these points, and show that, set in the context of her wider theory, her analysis of the French and American revolutions is not at odds with egalitarianism.

Arendt’s fundamental problem with the poor and poverty is that poverty eliminates freedom: ‘poverty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity’. No longer are people free, but under such poverty there is no freedom, no control over one’s destiny and no possibility of carrying out political acts in the public realm; rather, one must follow necessity and struggle simply to feed oneself. In this analysis, as we shall see later, there lies a powerful argument for the eradication of such poverty, so as to let all participate in politics and judgment.

What caused the French Revolution to fail, argues Arendt, is that it became a revolution about poverty, not about freedom: ‘it was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor.’ The poor, ‘when they appeared on the scene of politics’, brought necessity with them, with the result that ‘the new

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14 CC, p. 196
republic was stillborn’ because ‘freedom had surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself’.\textsuperscript{16} What is objectionable about the poor and the French Revolution for Arendt is not simply some unjustified snobbery or elitism, or even the notion that revolutions should somehow be the preserve of a political class (as though this were possible). Rather, the problem with poverty is that it brings necessity into politics, and thereby destroys politics, in Arendt’s sense of the word, because there is no meaningful freedom in the face of necessity – politics cannot be dictated by necessity, but rather, to be called politics at all, must be the preserve of free actions among equals. As we shall see later on, judgment in politics is judgment where there are no rules of the sort that are dictated by necessity. Necessity makes such judgment impossible and thus politics, for Arendt, cannot exist in this kind of poverty. It is in this sense that Andrew Schaap can describe ‘the satisfaction of human needs as, at best a pre-political concern and, at worst, the basis of an anti-political politics’ for Arendt.\textsuperscript{17}

Rancière argues that Arendt is mistaken in drawing a clear ontological separation between the social and the political, between \textit{zoe}, the needs of biological life, and \textit{bios}, the freedom of the good life. For Rancière, the distinction between the social and the political is ‘always a matter of politics’. The distinction can be either disciplined – policed – or the subject of politics, which challenges the distinction.\textsuperscript{18} Fraser, as Schaap notes, suggests two ways in which this distinction might be policed – first, by the discourse of expert, and secondly by reactive discourses which deny the legitimacy of needs as the proper subject of politics.\textsuperscript{19} It may appear that Arendt is at risk of being in the second camp, as her writings on the French Revolution appear to suggest that need is not the proper subject of politics. However, Schaap argues that Arendt’s theory can accommodate a truly ‘political politics of need’, which can meet all of Arendt’s criteria for political action.\textsuperscript{20} Accepting Rancière’s point that the divide between the political and the social is contingent, and that needs too are contingent and shaped by politics, such a politics would bring about equality through ‘the demonstration of the equality of those subordinated within [a political order] with their social superiors’.\textsuperscript{21} By acting politically, the poor can show themselves to be equal in the sense that they are equally able to initiate action, to set in motion, \textit{agere, archein}.

It was precisely this political politics of need that was \textit{not} practised during the French Revolution. Thus Arendt’s criticism of the actions of revolutionary France does not necessarily preclude the importance of poverty as an important political issue. As Schaap demonstrates, poverty can form part of the content of political speech and action, and at the same time can disrupt the existing order, creating a politics radical in its equality. We shall return to the disruption of existing orders and the possibility of ever-new political realms in the subsequent discussion of judgment.

\textsuperscript{16} OR, p. 54
\textsuperscript{17} Andrew Schaap, “The Politics of Need”, in Andrew Schaap, D Celermajer, V Karalils (Eds.), \textit{Power Judgment and Political Evil: In Conversation with Hannah Arendt}, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010), pp. 157-170, p. 157
\textsuperscript{18} Jacques Rancière, quoted in Schaap, “The Politics of Need”, pp. 165-166
\textsuperscript{19} Nancy Fraser, quoted in Schaap, “The Politics of Need”, pp. 166-167
\textsuperscript{20} Schaap, “The Politics of Need”, p. 168
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 168
Further to considerations of the French Revolution, there is a case to be made that for Arendt, the American Revolution was not free from considerations of poverty and equality. In ‘The Crisis of Education’, she notes that the ‘meaning of this new order [ie. that order created by the American Revolution], this founding of a new world against the old, was and is the doing away with poverty and oppression’. Arendt is clear that the American republic ‘planned to abolish poverty and slavery’ and quotes with approval the words of John Adams, ‘I always consider the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination and emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth’, and argues that ‘This is the basic intent or the basic law in accordance with which America began her historical and political existence.’

1.2 Arendt and the Ancients

Hauke Brunkhorst argues that there is an inherent contradiction in Arendt’s thought on equality and freedom, stemming from the two very different sources from which she draws her key inspiration. On the one hand, her ideas on freedom drawn from the Greek _polis_, he argues, are ‘elitist in [their] content and presuppositions’, whereas on the other hand, her ideas on freedom as ‘spontaneous new beginning’, drawn from St. Augustine, have ‘an egalitarian core’. The Greek _polis_ is elitist because the leisure that makes participation in politics and judgment possible depends on ‘the existence of ‘unequals’ who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state’. Equality in political participation for Hellenic males meant the subjugation of woman and slaves, who were forced into lives of labour to make politics economically possible: ‘the point of the exploitation of slaves in classical Greece was to liberate their masters entirely from labor so that they then might enjoy the freedom of the political arena’. Equality, then, for the Ancients, admits Arendt, was not connected with justice, as it is today.

With the technological advances of the last 2500 years, a way out of this paradox is possible. No society today depends economically on slavery – at least in the sense of slavery in Ancient Greece. Although capitalist relations remain exploitative, there is no necessity that they do so. Mechanisation and automation mean that it is possible to conceive of societies where all people, not just white men of a certain age and status, have the leisure to be able to participate in politics and in rights recognition arenas. In this sense, we can agree with Butler, who argues that ‘the central place accorded to political participation in the

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22 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”, in _Between Past and Future_, p. 172
24 Arendt, _The Promise of Politics_, p. 117; see also Butler, “Arendt and Aristotle on Equality, Leisure, and Solidarity”
25 Arendt, _The Human Condition_, p. 32
26 Arendt, _The Promise of Politics_, p. 117
27 Arendt, _The Human Condition_, pp. 32-33
28 Shiraz Dossa seems to misunderstand Arendt on this point, arguing that Arendt ‘would have us understand the ‘old and terrible truth, that only violence and rule over others could make some men free’; placing the quotation of Arendt makes it clear she actually thinks that ‘the rise of technology…has refuted’ this truth. Shiraz Dossa, _The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt_ (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), p. 67; Hannah Arendt, _On Revolution_, p. 110
Aristotelian and Arendtian picture of the good life leads their positions toward something much more egalitarian than anything either of them would have countenanced.  

Technological advance allows the possibility that the two freedoms (and equalities) in Arendt (‘Augustinian’ freedom and the freedom of the polis) can link up: admitting every person to the political community through recognising their right to have rights means that all attain equal status (alongside distinction rather than conformity) and are able to take part in judgment. Further to this, as Hansen notes, Arendt is using the polis as a metaphor: she is not seriously advocating that we import all aspects of Ancient Greek political life to the contemporary world: Arendt ‘fully understands that the conditions which gave rise to it – the existence of small, largely homogenous populations organized through a relatively simple division of labour (which included slavery) and bound together by a religiously based social consensus – cannot be duplicated in the modern world.’

Brunkhorst is correct to say that participation in the public realm is contingent on mastering necessity, as it is on having leisure time to devote to politics (as Butler points out). Arendt notes that ‘men achieved such liberation by means of violence, by forcing others to bear the burden of life for them’ and that this ‘was the core of slavery’. However, today, ‘the rise of technology’ has ‘refuted the old and terrible truth that only violence and rule over others could make some men free’. We can have the desirable aspects of Ancient Greece – public realm and judging – without needing slavery too: technology can make us free enough to enable our political participation.

In Arendt’s analysis of the moderns and of the ancients – mass society, ‘modern equality’, and the French and American revolutions, and the Greek polis – there are clearly aspects that lay her work open to charges of elitism. However, such charges miss the point and misinterpret Arendt. Rather, as this section has shown, there is nothing in her analysis of the moderns that prevents our reading her work as essentially egalitarian, and as far from elitist. To take Arendt’s praise of the polis as absolute endorsement of Ancient Greek politics in their entirety is to miss her point. Similarly, to take her analysis of modern equality and mass society as elitist snobbery is incorrect – her quarrel is not with equality, but specifically with equality combined with ‘the social’, in which equality is nothing but conformism. Finally, her analysis of French and American revolutions allows for much more nuance than is sometimes realised. It is not simply the case that the American revolution was good because it promoted freedom and that the French revolution was bad because it tried to settle the ‘social question’. Arendt’s theory allows, as Schaap argues, for a political politics of poverty, and indeed the American Revolution, of which she so approved, had at its heart the goal of abolishing poverty.

2. Judgment and Equality

30 Hansen, Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship, p. 51
32 OR, p. 110. My emphasis.
The second half of this paper will advance the argument that Arendt’s work on judgment, which underpins her conception of politics, implies egalitarianism, and cannot be fully realised without political communities characterised by a large degree of equality. This argument will be advanced in three sections: the first section considers the radically egalitarian implications of πείθειν (persuasion); the second considers φρόνησις and the importance of multiple perspectives and plurality; the third considers Augustine, archein and the form of the political community, and argues that there need not be a contradiction between the Augustinian and the Republican aspects of Arendt’s thought – in the equal human capacity to begin lies the possibility of the establishment of the Republic.

Before this, it is worth substantiating the claim that judgment is an essential aspect of Arendt’s conception of politics in order to demonstrate just how crucial judgment is to understand Arendt on politics, and thereby how the equality implied in judgment suggests that Arendt is rather more egalitarian than some commentators suggest.

It is well-established that, for Arendt, the political community is ‘different from all other forms of human communal life’. The difference is that only the political community involves freedom: ‘being free and living in the polis were, in a certain sense, one and the same’. 34 This freedom, for Arendt, ‘is understood negatively as not being ruled or ruling, and positively as a space which can be created only by men and in which each man moves among his peers’. Anyone who is ruled is not free; neither is anyone ruling. Without equal status there is no freedom. 35

This condition is important not just in its own right but also because only under such conditions of freedom and equality can ‘all things be recognized in their many-sidedness’. This ‘ability to see the same thing first from two opposing sides and then from all sides’ stems from the impartiality of Homer and was, Arendt argues, lost almost completely (perhaps with the exception of a comment of Cato, which is almost all that was written of Arendt’s volume on Judging at the time of her death 36) until Kant’s discussion of the faculty of judgment. 37 Although dismissive of Kant early in her career, 38 Arendt turns back to Kant, and in particular his account of judging, which she holds to be the truest expression of his political philosophy. 39 In Kant, phronesis, ‘the greatest possible overview of all the possible standpoints and viewpoints from which an issue can be seen and judged’, re-appears as ‘enlarged mentality (eine erweiterte Denkungsart)’, defined as the ability ‘to think from the position of every other person’.40 The faculty of judgment is not just a matter of aesthetic taste, but is political too – indeed ‘judgment may be one of the fundamental abilities of man

34 Hannah Arendt, The Promise of Politics, p. 116
35 Ibid., p. 117
36 ‘Victrix causa diis placuit sed victra Catona’ (The cause of the victor pleased the gods, but that of the defeated pleased Cato)
37 Ibid., p. 167
39 Ibid., p. 380
as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm’.  

For the Greeks, *phronesis* was the principal virtue of the statesman in contradistinction to the wisdom of the philosopher. Judgments and political opinions are both persuasive: ‘the judging person – as Kant says quite beautifully – can only ‘woo the consent of everyone else’ in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually’. Such persuasion, Arendt notes, ‘corresponds closely to what the Greeks called *πείθειν*, the convincing and persuading speech which they regarded as the typically political form of people talking with one another.’ This mode of speech defined the political from the non-political with its methods of violence and ‘from another non-violent form of coercion, the coercion by truth.’ Judgment involves the judging person trying to see things from all sides, and trying to persuade everyone else in the political community of the correctness of her judgment, a process which can occur only within the political community, with its equality and freedom. Judging, then, is the political act *par excellence*, and is central to Arendt’s conception of politics: the political community, with its conditions of freedom and equality, is required because it is only this constellation that allows for persuasion, many-sidedness and judging. Equality – and the freedom equality brings – is a pre-requisite for judging, as the next sections will argue.

2.1 Peithein

The mode of discourse characterising judgment is persuasion, or *peithein*, compared, as we have seen, by Kant to ‘wooing’. That this is at the heart of judgment, and thus of politics, is a radically egalitarian step. Although in its original, Greek context, this egalitarianism extended merely formally, and merely between a small group of non-slave, male Greeks, if we take Arendt’s analysis of the polis to be in part metaphorical, as Philip Hansen does, then it would make sense to apply the key parts of this metaphor – freedom, equality, and judgment – to our contemporary political context.

Today, save for some members of the scarcely credible fringes of politics, no-one would argue that anyone should be excluded from the polis on the basis of gender or racial or ethnic background. So much is implied in Arendt’s Augustinian underlining of the universally human capacity to begin, too (which we shall turn to in more detail in the next section).

Further realising this Hellenic metaphor as a basis for a modern politics of judging requires us to pay attention to what is meant by equality. There is no space here to fully consider this infinitely large question, which has occupied many philosophers, political theorists, newspaper column inches and conferences throughout the world for many years. However, it is possible to examine peithein to suggest some aspects of equality that such ‘wooing’ speech suggests.

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41 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (London, Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 219; p. 221
42 Ibid., p. 221
43 Ibid., p. 222
At the very minimum, *peithein* means a formal equality, an equality of status, or rank. There can be no *peithein* in a military set-up, for example, where formal hierarchy makes a nonsense of persuasion and obedience and command are the order of the day. Similarly, to talk of persuasion is nonsensical in a society where some groups have more or fewer rights than other groups: where women do not have the vote or are not allowed to drive cars, for example, or where people of certain sexualities are denied certain rights, or where people of a certain ethnic background are denied certain rights, or conversely, where people of a certain ethnic background, sexuality or gender are entitled to some form of legal privilege.

Arendt was notoriously silent on economic matters, as Pitkin notes.\(^\text{45}\) However, *peithein*, taken forward into the context of contemporary politics, would seem to imply economic equality too, at least the sort of economic equality that makes debate possible, rather than empty words in the face of overwhelming economic power.

Economic inequality clearly has the potential to damage the process of judging, and to corrupt the egalitarian persuasion implied by *peithein*. Knowing that someone has a lot of money, and is thus in a position to help you, is something that is likely to have an effect on the receptiveness you display to their argument, whether consciously or unconsciously. Further, with wealth comes the possibility of corruption, of people’s judgment being bought under the guise of persuasion. Wealth can also enable an argument to be made more persuasive, either with evidence (though, of course, persuasion rules out arguments from fact)\(^\text{46}\) or through propaganda.

Added to these practical concerns is the simple fact that disparities in wealth (and the disparity in status that often accompanies them) go against the spirit of *peithein*. In conditions of inequality, the appeal is not to equals, but to people who are in some way (materially) inferior. Much like a hostile takeover, the attempt to persuade is backed up by the threat of destruction through economic rather than political means. The less wealthy person, the subject of the persuasion, is thus subjected to a politics of necessity smuggled in behind the ostensible politics of persuasion. In this way, the social once more permeates and destroys the political.

It is for just such a reason that *peithein* can happen in no public realms characterised by domination. Where the threat of force, economic or physical, lies behind politics, politics is reduced to a charade, and devalued utterly. Such is made clear by Thucydides in the Melian dialogue: the political words, the attempt by Athens to persuade Melios to bend to their will is a charade. As Thucydides has the Melians say: ‘The quiet interchange of explanations is a reasonable thing, and we do not object to that. But your warlike movements, which are present not only to our fears but to our eyes, seem to belie your words.’\(^\text{47}\) When raw force stands behind politics, persuasion – *peithein* – is rendered meaningless.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^\text{45}\) See footnote 1.
\(^\text{46}\) Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, p. 222.
A final aspect of equality that peithein points towards is an equality of information. Judgment occurs in situations where there are no set, established rules, that is to say, in political situations, where Plato, translated by Arendt, has it that ‘men are perpetually disputing about rights and altering them, and whatever alteration they make at any time is at that time authoritative’. It is the outcome of the discussion, of the persuasive discourse that matters. This is undermined by expert appeals to fact or to unshifting foundation. Anything so resembling a fixed Platonic form undermines the radically democratic dimension of judging. Thus, peithein is undermined by expert discourse. This is not to say that expert discourse is, of itself, a bad thing: we cannot hope to persuade people through political discourse, for example, that gravity does not cause bodies to accelerate towards the earth at around \(9.8 \text{m/s}^2\). Rather, expert discourse on questions of what is excellent and what is the right course of action in the political sphere is more suspect. As we have noted already, such expert discourse can be exclusionary discourse, where the privilege expertise outweighs the arguments of those they act to exclude or discipline. The best amelioration for this is that judgment takes place in a political community characterised by wide access to knowledge, including the evidence upon which experts base their arguments.

### 2.2 Phronesis

In the context of Arendt’s work on judgment, *phronesis* refers, as we have seen, to ‘the greatest possible overview of all the possible standpoints and viewpoints from which an issue can be seen and judged’, which is analogous to Kant’s ‘enlarged mentality (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*)’, defined as the ability ‘to think from the position of every other person’.

This section will argue that this feature of judging has significant egalitarian implications, which complement the egalitarian nature of peithein.

An anti-egalitarian reading of *phronesis* and *erweiterte Denkungsart* might suggest that the essential thing is that person judging can take into account many possible points of view and that this does not necessarily mean that many people ought to be involved in the judging. Rather, so long as the one person, some sort of philosopher king perhaps, can consider things from multiple (if hypothetical) standpoints, then the people who those standpoints relate to do not at all need to take part in judgment. An enlightened despot could judge, on this reading, perfectly satisfactorily.

However, this reading does not stand up to much scrutiny, and would, this section argues, be a misreading of Arendt. Epistemologically, there are clear problems (as John Stuart Mill famously alludes to): how could such a judge possibly have enough knowledge of so many standpoints? How can this knowledge be gained acquired without a direct insight into the brains and thoughts of others? Further, such a reading offends against common

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sense: if we wish to know someone’s opinion on a political issue, the obvious starting point is to ask them. In this, they are admitted to the public realm; invited to have a political opinion, to act and to speak, and to be a judge themselves.

Reading Arendt’s work on judgment in conjunction with other passages in her work on politics makes it clear that it is not just a plurality of hypothetical standpoints that is important, but a plurality of people too. She argues that there ‘must always be a plurality of individuals or peoples and a plurality of standpoints to make reality even possible and to guarantee its continuation’, for ‘the world comes into being only if there are perspectives; it exists as the order of worldly things only if it is viewed, now this way, now that, at any given time.’ In a pre-echo of Francis Fukuyama, Arendt argues that ‘if…there were to be some cataclysm that left the earth with only one nation, and matters in that nation were to come to a point where everyone saw and understood everything from the same perspective, living in total unanimity with one another, the world would have come to an end in a historical-political sense.’ Arendtian politics is clearly characterised by plurality and by speech and action. It would make sense to read phronesis and judgment in light of this, and see phronesis, therefore, as egalitarian in its implication: the more who are involved in speaking, in making their standpoint public and enriching the plurality of the judgment discourse, the better the judgment will be, and the ‘wider’ the ‘way of thinking’ (erweiterte Denkungsart) will become.

The idea that judgment is an activity for all in society, forced on us by our freedom and by the collapse of previously existing ethics laid bare and illustrated by the tumult and horror of the first half of the twentieth century, is borne out through reading Arendt’s writings on personal and collective responsibility. As Rosalyn Diprose notes, individual responsibility for collective acts such as the Shoah goes beyond just accountability. Rather, such terrible acts, and complicity with them by millions, shows almost the ‘universal breakdown, not of personal responsibility, but of personal judgment’. This passage of Arendt makes it clear that judgment is not the preserve of an exclusive few, but rather more like a universal duty: as we find ourselves confronted by modernity with freedom, we must judge – it is up to everyone to, as Arendt put it, simply ‘think what we are doing’.

52 Arendt, The Promise of Politics, p. 175
54 Arendt notes that it can seem almost as though we are ‘doomed to be free’, and that there is a temptation to ‘escape [freedom’s] awesome responsibility by electing some form of fatalism’ Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind: Willing (New York, Harvest, 1978), p. 217
55 Arendt calls our attention to ‘the few rules and standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong, and which were invoked to judge or justify others and themselves, and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or natural law.’ Yet, in the twentieth century, ‘without much notice, all this collapsed almost overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people’. Responsibility and Judgment, p. 50
58 HC, p. 5
As well as being essential in preventing great evils from being perpetrated, there is a more uplifting side to judgment, which connects back to the aesthetic origins of Kant’s thought. Kristeva points out that ‘without spectators, beautiful objects would never see the light of day, for they are created by the judgment of spectators and critics’.\textsuperscript{59} In the ideal political society, we are all free and equal, but it is the creation of beautiful objects and the doing of great deeds that makes this freedom and equality worthwhile. Our freedom allows us to act, but without an audience for these acts, to understand, appreciate, and judge the acts, the acts are worthless.

### 2.3 Augustinian equality: the capacity to begin

The argument of this paper, that Arendt’s political theory is fundamentally egalitarian, is underlined by Arendt’s concentration of one aspect of Augustine’s political thought, namely the notion that all humans are equal in that all humans have the capacity to begin and to set events in motion: ‘\textit{initium ergo esset, creatus est homo}’ – man was created that there be a beginning. Our common ability to begin is the foundation of equality and of the political community. It is through this ability that we can create structures which transform our natural inequalities into political equalities, enabling us to be free, to judge, and to do great and memorable acts and thus achieve a sort of immortality. We choose to be equal, but this capacity to choose equality by beginning politics is a capacity we all equally share.

Waldron argues that Arendt sometimes pretends to think that ‘we could just hold a group of entities to be one another’s political equals, irrespective of what the entities are like’ and notes that it would be ‘slightly mad’ to do so, ‘as though we could just decide to treat trees, tigers, teapots, and teenagers as one another’s equals for political purposes’.\textsuperscript{60} Waldron undoubtedly makes a good point here, and the egalitarianism discussed in this paper clearly does not extend to teapots (whether it does to tigers, and indeed teenagers, is a contentious point that we shall avoid for now). However, amongst humans, we can hold any human to be our equal: political structures are artificial, not natural, a point which Arendt makes on several occasions: ‘the human world is always the product of man’s amor mundi, a human \textit{artifice’}.\textsuperscript{61} Politics is artifice and done in spite of nature: ‘our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization’, despite our natural inequalities.\textsuperscript{62}

For all that, Waldron has a point in that artificial equality and the artifice involved in constructing the world of politics rely on one human trait, held equally – as Arendt’s reading of Augustine stresses – by all humans. Producing artificial equality through politics is rooted in humans’ \textit{equal} capacity to begin: ‘man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence: [\textit{Initium}] \textit{ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nemo fuit}. In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist


\textsuperscript{60} Jeremy Waldron, “Arendt on the foundations of equality”, p. 18

\textsuperscript{61} Arendt, \textit{The Promise of Politics}, p. 203. My emphasis.

\textsuperscript{62} OT, 301
after each individual’s death. Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. This freedom is fundamentally egalitarian – all humans are confronted with this freedom simply because they are born and are beginnings; birth causes ruptures in what is, and means that what is to be remains an open question. In the universal human capacity for beginning lies the capacity for creating new, artificial polities, new spheres of equality and freedom within which judging is possible.

Brunghorst, as we have seen, argues that two notions of freedom found in Arendt’s work – the republican idea of freedom on the one hand, and the Augustinian notion of freedom on the other, are ‘not totally compatible’, as republican freedom is ‘elitist in its connect and presuppositions’, whereas Augustinian freedom ‘has an egalitarian core’. For Brunkhorst, these freedoms coincide only in the context of successful political revolutions, specifically in the ‘extraordinary event of foundation that marks the conclusion’ of such revolutions.

As we have seen, the idea that republican freedom relies on inequality is a contingent one. To be free in this way requires mastery over necessity, which in Ancient Greece was achieved through slavery, and through much of the early modern and modern age was achieved by the gendered division of labour: the domestic slavery of women freeing their husbands to act in the public realm. More recently, globalisation has led to mastery of necessity through exploitation of others in the global South. A combination of technological advances and successful emancipatory political discourses means that freedom need not be based on domination and others’ lack of freedom.

Further, for Arendt, the political community is not necessarily geographically fixed. In her discussion of the Greek polis, she notes that it is ‘not the city-state in its physical location’ but rather ‘the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and peaking together’ and therefore ‘its true space lies between people living together for this purpose’. The political community is, literally, that which is ‘inter est…which lies between people’. As those people shift from one part of the world, so does the political community: as Thucydides’ Nicias puts it, ‘Wherever you go, you will be a polis’. For Arendt, ‘action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere’.

Thus, in our capacity to begin, humans can found political communities on many levels and in many geographical places. Political communities need not be tied to existing states; rather, to be legitimate, the state apparatus must map-on effectively to political communities. Given this universal human capacity to begin, there is no overwhelming reason to carry on in political societies which are unequal and which do not allow for judgment (in so far as these can truly be labelled ‘political societies’). Rather, this capacity of archein, to set in motion and begin a new society has radically egalitarian implications: we can begin a

63 BPF, 165-166
64 Brunkhorst, 178
65 Brunkhorst, 190
66 Ibid., p. 198
67 Ibid., p. 182
69 Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 198
new political community, either corresponding roughly to the shape of an existing polity, such as in 1789 in France, or we can abandon it altogether, in favour of beginning anew, as in America. Thus where Republican equality conflicts with our natural ‘Augustinian’ equality, humans have the capacity to found the Republic anew to create the conditions of equality that are necessary for judgment and politics. It is in our equal capacity to begin, and to found new polities, that the freedom of the republic lies. In our being born, and the ‘miracle’ of our newness in the world and in our capacity to begin and to found new politics, lies the hope of a way out from the ‘dark times’ of the twentieth century.

Concluding remarks

Arendt is not as elitist as some critics have suggested. Rather, her theory, particularly its account of judgment and politics, makes no sense without egalitarianism. For this reason, if we see in Arendt’s work any clues as to how politics can survive the dark times of the twentieth century, then we must couple that understanding to an understanding of the polis as something that must be fundamentally egalitarian, not just in an empty formal sense, but in a real sense which allows everyone to take part in the process of judgment. Only in this way can politics continue, deprived of the guiding hand of tradition, in a world where we are confronted by freedom and a lack of foundation.

Arendt’s account of modern equality and mass society does not mean she is against equality per se or that she is simply an elitist. Her response to the French and American revolutions is more nuanced than is sometimes realised: both revolutions responded in meaningful ways to poverty. Furthermore, to put the case positively, her account of judgment turns on equality. Inequality makes judgment nigh on impossible, and certainly impaired. Peithein, persuasion, is thoroughly egalitarian in its spirit: one can only persuade equals – to subordinates there is only the threat of violence, either physical or economic. Phronesis requires a plurality of judgment, and the greater the plurality, the better the quality and legitimacy of the judgment. As judgment is so central to politics – we can do nothing else but judge, facing the freedom of the void left in place of tradition – there can be no meaningful politics without thorough-going egalitarianism. If we wish to defend politics, we must take the radical implications of this seriously.