

Natural Aristocracy, Instrumentalism, Equality and Excellence

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Abstract

Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality* presents an interpretation of Confucian political morality, a critique of political equality and an argument in support of a form of meritocratic instrumentalism for politics. This paper sympathetically engages with Bai's discussion. It grants, but does not itself defend, his rejection of political equality. It distinguishes basic moral equality from the ideal of social equality, suggesting that Bai's view is compatible with the former, but not with the latter. It then distinguishes two understandings of political meritocracy: meritocratic instrumentalism and natural aristocracy. It clarifies natural aristocracy and presents a case for accepting it over meritocratic instrumentalism. Unlike the proponent of meritocratic instrumentalism, the proponent of natural aristocracy holds that those who are most fit to rule have a claim to rule over and above the instrumental advantages that their rule would secure. And, unlike the proponent of meritocratic instrumentalism, the proponent of natural aristocracy contends that relational values in politics have a role to play in the justification of political decision-making arrangements. Key to the discussion throughout is the challenge that the ideal of social equality poses to any defense of political meritocracy. The paper contends that natural aristocracy is better positioned to respond to this challenge than meritocratic instrumentalism. The paper concludes by relating natural aristocracy to the liberal idea of a social union of social unions and to Michael Walzer's ideal of complex equality.

Keywords: political equality, natural aristocracy, meritocracy, excellence, fittingness, complex equality

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Much mainstream western political theory affirms both political equality and liberal neutrality. Citizens should have an equal say in politics, but politics should not be concerned with promoting excellence or helping citizens to lead good lives. Bai's Confucian view as expressed in his 2020 work *Against Political Equality*—henceforth simply the “BC view”¹—rejects both of these commitments. Under the hybrid regime that it recommends, aristocratic elements of political rule are introduced to counteract democratic elements and the state promotes virtue. This view thus exhibits a pleasing symmetry. Citizens are not equally competent at political self-rule. Hence, it is appropriate for some of them to have greater political say than others. Correspondingly, citizens are not equally competent at managing their own lives. Hence, it is appropriate for the state, insofar as it is competently directed, to take measures to help citizens make better choices about their own lives and to instill respect for excellence (Bai 2020, 278-79).²

The symmetry I have described as pleasing, and which I here explore sympathetically, will not be found to be pleasing by everyone, to be sure. Some will object that the BC view is inconsistent with *basic moral equality*; roughly, the claim that each person is of equal moral worth. It is important to recognize that this objection is mistaken. Recognizing that people differ in their capacities to govern, whether others or themselves, does not imply that they are of unequal moral worth. Basic moral equality, whether it is true or not, need not contradict the BC view. However, downstream from basic moral equality lies another kind of equality that has attracted much interest of late. It is the kind of equality manifested in a society when its members “relate to one another on a footing of equality” (Scheffler 2002, 17-18). Following others, I will call this *social equality*. The BC view cannot be reconciled with social equality, for it affirms hierarchies that are constitutively inconsistent with its realization.

¹ Whether Bai correctly interprets the Confucian tradition is not my concern here. By referring to his view as the “BC view,” I seek to avoid assessing its fidelity to this tradition.

² “The virtues a liberal state needs to and should promote have to be “thicker” than what the liberal value of neutrality or even a later Rawlsian would endorse.” As will become clear, I think the BC view should support state support for excellence in a wide range of spheres of social life.

This paper seeks to show that social equality presents an important challenge to the BC view and then suggests a way by which the challenge might be met. The discussion proceeds as follows. First, I explain the ideal of social equality in a little more detail and show how it is compromised by Bai's rejection of political equality. Next, I distinguish two views of political meritocracy that contrast with political equality. Respectively, these views are meritocratic instrumentalism, which Bai embraces and defends, and natural aristocracy, which is a competitor to both political equality and meritocratic instrumentalism. Finally, I present a preliminary case for natural aristocracy. I do so by clarifying the view and responding briefly to a couple of important objections to it. My brief for natural aristocracy is (mainly) conditional. If one is persuaded by Bai's arguments to reject political equality, then there is a case for embracing natural aristocracy over meritocratic instrumentalism, since the former secures the benefits of the latter while also providing resources for responding to the challenge presented by the ideal of social equality. I conclude with a discussion of the relation between natural aristocracy and the promotion of virtue and excellence by the state, thereby returning to the pleasing symmetry in the BC view.

I. Social Equality

When social equality is realized among a group of persons, the relevant parties relate to, and interact with, one another as equals. Social equality is not the only relational ideal, however. Indeed, as we will see, natural aristocracy can be defended in part because it instantiates a non-egalitarian relational ideal. How then should we understand the value of a relational ideal, whether egalitarian or non-egalitarian?

Two possibilities can and should be distinguished. A relational ideal could be an ideal of the good. Its realization among a group of persons, on this understanding, would be good for those persons, enriching their lives and furthering their flourishing. By contrast, a relational ideal could be an ideal of the right. The realization of the ideal among a group of persons, on this understanding, would be required if they were to treat one another as they ought to treat them. Of course, a

relational ideal might be thought to be both an ideal of the good and an ideal of the right. Here I will assume that it is at least an ideal of the right. So understood, a relational ideal is a matter of people relating to one another in a way that is appropriate, or as I shall say, *fitting*, given their status and competence. The ideal of social equality holds that the members of a society treat one another in a way that is fitting if and only if they relate to one another as equals.

Fitting relations in general are structured in a way that is responsive to the status and competence of the relating parties. Presumably, it can be appropriate for some to have greater say or greater authority than others in a given domain in virtue of their status or competence. A teacher in virtue of his expertise has greater say over what goes on in his classroom than his students. There is hierarchy in the teacher/student relationship, but it is, or can be, one that is fitting. Likewise, it can be inappropriate for some to have greater say than others in a given domain if they do not possess the attributes that would justify their superior position. The hierarchy in a racial caste system is unfitting.

Those committed to social equality need not reject all social hierarchies. Social equality does not require that all have an equal say in every domain of life. But contemporary proponents of social equality all reject the political inequalities that are part of the BC view. Social equality without political equality, on this standard understanding, is not a possibility. Those who accept the standard understanding of social equality are often referred to as relational egalitarians. For them, the members of a society should come together as equal citizens in the political forum, where they determine their shared fate. As Elizabeth Anderson, herself an influential proponent of relational egalitarianism, has emphasized, there is an intimate link between social equality and democratic governance.

Egalitarians seek a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality. They seek to live together in a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one. Democracy is here understood as collective self-determination by means of open discussion among equals, in accordance with rules acceptable to all. To stand as an equal before others in discussion means that one is entitled to participate, that others recognize an obligation to listen respectfully and respond

to one's arguments, that no one need bow and scrape before others or represent themselves as inferior to others as a condition of having their claim heard. (Anderson 1999, 313)

Hard questions confront the relational egalitarian. Since not every distinction in rank or merit offends the ideal of social equality, why are some hierarchies, such as those in the political domain, and not others objectionable? If some hierarchies are eliminated, won't others assume greater significance? And how exactly are we to understand the deceptively simple sounding idea of giving all an equal say in politics?³ But while these questions are hard, the ideal of social equality, and the ideal of political equality that is taken to be an integral and necessary component of it, have resonated with many. A defense of the BC view would do well to respond to the general challenge it presents.

One might try to reconcile the BC view with social equality by appealing to a principle of equal opportunity. Bai claims that the hierarchy endorsed on the BC view is not "immobile" or fixed, but open to all (86). If all citizens have an equal opportunity to become deserving of a greater share of political influence, then political inequality is underwritten by a form of political equality. And, it might be urged, this latter form of political equality—equality of opportunity to exercise unequal political say—is the kind of political equality that is necessary, or at least sufficient, for social equality. This reply misses the force of what the proponent of social equality has in mind, however. The proponent of social equality maintains that there is an important kind of value realized by social relationships in which the parties relate as equals in their daily lives and in an on-going manner. The realization of this value cannot be secured by giving every citizen an equal shot at being on top.⁴ Not equal chances to rule unequally over others, but equal rule with others is what is called for, if social equality is to be achieved.⁵

³ For a penetrating critique of the idea of equal political say, see Dworkin (2000).

⁴ For a concise articulation of this thought, see Miller (2015).

⁵ Doubtless the issue here is a good deal more complicated than these brief remarks suggest. Proponents of social equality need to find a place for personal responsibility and for fair opportunity in their articulation of the ideal. But the gist of what is said here is broadly accurate.

II. Two Understandings of Political Meritocracy

Social equality presents a challenge to the BC view, or so I have claimed. But how serious is this challenge? There is a tendency in political philosophy to avoid trade-offs. If X and Y are both attractive ideals, and if there is no in principle obstacle to their joint achievement, then the political philosopher is tempted to say that in the good society both X and Y would be realized. He may be right; but the pressing question may not be “how do we realize both ideals,” but rather “how do we, in our circumstances, go forward when the pursuit of X predictably will set back the pursuit of Y.”

I rehearse this point here, since it bears on the issue of what the proponent of the BC view should say in response to the challenge pressed by the social egalitarian. He might be tempted to say that, while social equality is a genuine ideal, it is not the only thing worth caring about. If, for example, a political order could do better at securing important human rights by departing from social equality, then it should do so.⁶ Instrumentalists about political rule are often in this position. They recommend elitist or inegalitarian political decision-making procedures or devices to the extent that these would lead to better political outcomes, all things considered, over time.⁷ (Instrumentalists reject the idea that procedural considerations, such as giving all citizens an equal say, has value itself.) But a critic can counter that a better political arrangement than that favored by instrumentalism would do just as well at securing these political outcomes, while also realizing equality in the process of doing so. The critic of instrumentalism may be right that such an arrangement would be better if it could be achieved. But the issue remains of what to do when realizing equality in the political process comes at the expense of securing better political outcomes, all things considered.

Is the BC view an instrumentalist view? Bai tells us that it represents a middle way between hierarchy and equality. He proposes the following

⁶ This was Mill's view; and it may also have been Rawls's view.

⁷ For an influential contemporary statement of political instrumentalism, see Arneson (1993). See also Wall (2007).

guideline: “how much democratic participation depends upon how likely the participants are able to make sound decisions that are based on public interests” (71). And, he claims, in modern democracies “many citizens are not capable of making sound judgments on many political matters” (70). Hence, there is a need to put in place decision making procedures that “prevent incompetent citizens from having too much of a voice in political matters” (70). All of this sounds instrumentalist. Accordingly, Bai might agree that the best arrangement would be one in which all the citizens were able to make sound political decisions on equal footing, but doubt that such an arrangement is a realistic prospect for China and other societies. This response would come with a price. The political arrangements favored by the BC view are second-best, a concession in light of the trade-offs that need to be made. Alternatively, Bai might argue that the political domain is not one in which relational goods are appropriately pursued. The political relation should be understood to be a thoroughly instrumental relationship.

Viewing the political relation as thoroughly instrumental will seem unattractive to many. We have reason to care about both the reliability of the political process (roughly, how good it is at producing good outcomes over time) and how citizens relate to one another within the political process. To this extent, the relational egalitarian has a point. But there is another way the BC view can be conceptualized, one that does not construe the political relation as thoroughly instrumental. On this understanding, meritocracy is a form of natural aristocracy. Meritocratic instrumentalism and natural aristocracy are seldom distinguished, and they often point in the same direction, but they are different views. I want to propose that if the BC view is understood as embracing natural aristocracy, as opposed to meritocratic instrumentalism, then it will be better positioned to respond in a satisfying way to the challenge presented by the social egalitarian. On the proposal I am advancing, the BC view does not reject the idea that there is relational value to be realized in political life. It does not cede the terrain to the social egalitarian. Instead, natural aristocracy is presented as itself instantiating a valuable set of political relations.

III. Natural Aristocracy

Natural aristocracy is an underexplored view in contemporary political theory. As several commentators on Aristotle have noted, the view appears to be endorsed by Aristotle in his discussion of kingship in Book III of *The Politics*.⁸ Equal citizens, Aristotle claims, should rule one another in turns. Among equals, the ideal of equality should obtain in politics. But matters are different when someone clearly has a greater ability to rule well than others. Here competence and virtue ground a claim to have a greater political say than others. Indeed, it would be wrong, Aristotle claims, to subject a person of eminent virtue to equal rule with others. Banning him from the city would be preferable to leaving him to rule on equal terms with them. (We can speculate that Aristotle would have continued to think this even if it were known that letting the person of eminent virtue participate on equal terms with others would have instrumental benefits for the rule of the city.)

To appreciate the difference between meritocratic instrumentalism and natural aristocracy, it will be helpful to recall Plato's parable of the ship.⁹ Plato tells us that the sailor with a valid claim to steer the ship is the one with the competence to do so. This is the person who has mastered the art of navigation—the true navigator. But what exactly grounds his claim to steer the ship? Things are likely to go well for those on the ship if he takes the helm. There are consequences to incompetent navigation. The instrumentalist rests his case here. But it might also be said that the true navigator has a claim to steer the ship because it is fitting for him to do so. Generally speaking, it is fitting for those with the competence to do a task well to be assigned the task.

Imagine now the following scenario. In addition to the true navigator, there is another sailor on the ship, who, in fact, will steer it just as successfully as the true navigator. The second sailor, however, will do so without understanding or skill. He is like the novice archer who hits the bullseye by luck. A proponent of instrumentalism, who was aware of

⁸ See McKerlie (2001), Arneson (2016, with a discussion of McKerlie's paper at 167-68), and Mulgan (1987).

⁹ See Plato (1974, 145-46).

the relevant facts about the two sailors involved, would be indifferent as to which of them should steer the ship. Not so for the proponent of the fittingness claim. He would maintain that the true navigator alone has the valid claim to steer the ship. For it is fitting that those with the competence to perform a task well should perform it rather than those who are incompetent at the task, but lucky in its execution.¹⁰

The fittingness claim requires more analysis than I can give it here. But a few remarks are in order. Fittingness is a species of desert.¹¹ Applied to political rule, the object of the fittingness claim is political power or authority, and the basis or ground of the claim is the capacity and motivation to rule well. To borrow an analogy from Aristotle, we can compare the distribution of political power to that of a musical instrument. For example, we can ask, if a flute must be given to someone, to whom should it be given?¹² A natural answer is that the flute should be given to the person who has the greatest ability to play it well.

Now suppose that there are two candidates for receiving the flute. The first candidate, who is a good flute player, will use the flute to benefit his political community more than the second candidate, who is an excellent flute player, but more reclusive. If we think the flute should be given to the first candidate, then we will think that this is true in virtue of an instrumental claim. Giving the flute to him will do the most good for the political community. By contrast, if we think that the second candidate has the stronger claim to the flute, then we will think this is true in virtue of a fittingness claim. There is a natural fit between the good that is to be distributed, in this case the flute, and the ground for the distributive claim, in this case superior flute-playing ability.

¹⁰ For my purposes, it is not important to interpret Plato's views. But, given Plato's conviction that knowledge has more value than true belief, he might concur that it is better for the ship to be navigated knowledgeably than for it to be done well, but fortuitously.

¹¹ Sidgwick (1981, 350) uses the language of "fitness" to mark the claim of the competent, the qualified, or the cultivated to be given a resource that they will use better than others. He claims that "fitness", so understood, is often confused with desert. By contrast, Feinberg (1970, 77) holds that fitness for a job in virtue of present ability and future promise is a species of desert. I side here with Feinberg, but nothing of substance turns on this classificatory issue.

¹² See Aristotle (1988, 69).

We may think, of course, that both the merit-based instrumental claim and the fittingness claim are valid. If we think this, then we will need to decide which claim takes precedence in this example. A happier situation would result if the person with the superior ability to play the flute well was also the one who will use the flute to benefit his community the most. In this happier situation, both claims can be honored.

In articulating the fittingness claim, I have spoken of competence, or the capacity to perform a task well. With flute playing, the competence in question is a fairly straightforward matter. But competence with regard to political rule is more complex and more open to challenge. Competence to rule has different dimensions. Simplifying greatly, we can (following Bai) single out two dimensions: cognitive and motivational. Cognitive competence is the skill that is exercised in identifying what is for the common good of one's society.¹³ Motivational competence is the disposition to care appropriately—and to the appropriate degree—about the common good of one's society and to have this concern have appropriate effect on one's decision-making and actions regarding the politics of one's society. We can add to this a third dimension, a competence that can be termed "executive." Executive competence involves the tact, savvy, resourcefulness and perhaps cunning to advance one's political ends effectively.

How might competent political rulers be identified and empowered to rule? The complexity of the relevant competence with its disparate dimensions, cognitive, motivational and executive, makes this a daunting task. Bai discusses some of the relevant issues here, which include how to develop and implement an appropriate selection mechanism to identify those with a claim to greater political say, how to design institutions that effectively enable the competent to have a greater say, and how to secure legitimacy (in the sociological sense) for meritocratic institutions. But even if these institutional and sociological challenges could be met, there are deeper objections to meritocratic rule in

¹³ Competent political rule concerns inter-societal relations as well (as Bai's discussion in chapters 7 and 8 of *Against Political Equality* indicates), but here I am simplifying.

general, and natural aristocracy in particular. Two of them seem particularly pressing.

First, the competence involved in political rule must be developed under social conditions. Those with the most competence to rule in any actual society might not be those who are most “naturally” fit to rule in that society. For given the education and training they received, those who by nature are less fit to rule might be the most competent to rule now, and those who by nature were most fit to rule, given their education and training, might not be competent to do so now. We can ask, do those who are now most fit to rule have a claim to rule, or do those who would have been most fit to rule, under ideal conditions, have the claim? The term ‘natural aristocracy’ suggests that natural ability grounds the claim to rule, but, of course, the relationship between natural talent and the realization of that talent in any social setting is complex and difficult to determine. Critics of natural aristocracy can object that the observed differences in the competence to rule reflect differential access to the education, training and opportunities to develop that competence. If the critics are right, then a society that was committed to distributing political power in accord with competence to rule could aim to establish the social conditions that enable all citizens to develop an equal competence to rule. In this way, an initial commitment to natural aristocracy might lead one to favor politically egalitarian arrangements. Call this the development objection.

Second, natural aristocrats are those with the capacities to rule well and so there is a non-accidental connection between their rule and rule that would be favored on instrumentalist grounds. But the strength of this non-accidental connection can be and has been challenged. Consider the body of research that supports what is sometimes called the “diversity-trumps-ability-thesis.”¹⁴ According to this thesis, by increasing the diversity of a decision-making body, we improve its reliability in reaching good decisions, even if the increased diversity lowers the average competence of those participating in the decision-making body. Sometimes the friends of political equality try to leverage

¹⁴ See Page (2007) and Landemore (2020).

the diversity-trumps-ability-thesis to reject all meritocratic proposals for political rule. If they are right about this, then the game is up for natural aristocracy. Mere difference of perspective is not a mark of competence. Call this the diversity objection.

A full response to these objections is not possible here, but a few remarks can be made. The development objection has force against those who have the greatest competence to rule, but have acquired that competence under conditions that are not conducive to the development of the capacities of those with the most natural ability to rule. It has no force against a regime of natural aristocracy that has emerged from optimal conditions of development, however. Proponents of natural aristocracy should not be complacent about how the requisite competence to rule gets developed, but they need not abandon their view because actual social conditions of development have not been ideal.

The diversity objection to natural aristocracy cuts deeper. It also challenges meritocratic instrumentalism. However, in all likelihood, the diversity-trumps-ability thesis is an overstatement of an important truth. Good decision making in politics requires a diversity of perspective. This fact provides a measure of support for including a democratic component in a political decision-making arrangement. The hybrid regime of the BC view is sensitive to both competence to rule and diversity of perspective. The meritocratic component of the hybrid regime responds well to the competence desiderata, while the democratic component responds well to the diversity of perspective desiderata.

Would a hybrid regime containing both aristocratic and democratic elements contradict the fittingness claim? It would not for the following reason. The fittingness claim holds that those who are most competent to rule have a claim to have a greater say in politics than others, and this can be secured while ensuring that all have some say in politics. Mill's scheme of plural votes (Mill 1861, 476) after all, was advanced in tandem with the idea that all adults, subject to a few qualifications, should be included in the political decision-making process. For Mill, all citizens have a claim to participate, but the competent citizens have a claim to have a greater say. The friend of natural aristocracy can concur

with this judgment.¹⁵

Perhaps the hybrid regime would not maximally honor the claims of those who were fit to rule, but it would honor their claims nonetheless. When compared to the decision-making process that gives all citizens an equal say, it would acknowledge and reflect the truth, if it is a truth, of the fittingness claim. That, I think, provides sufficient basis for the proponent of natural aristocracy to make his case for meritocratic rule. He makes his case not in the first instance by pointing to the good consequences in terms of political outcomes of meritocratic rule, although, as I have explained, the fact that these good consequences would be forthcoming is an important part of his case. He starts instead with the thought that the political realm is a realm to which the fittingness claim applies. Ruling well and doing so with skill is a form of excellence that a political society should acknowledge and celebrate. To acknowledge and celebrate this form of excellence adequately, a society may need to build it into the institutional structure of the decision-making process by ensuring that those who are fit to rule have greater say.¹⁶

Doing so would have consequences for the character of the political relationship. And the character of the political relationship itself has value. On this matter, the natural aristocrat and the social egalitarian are in agreement. The natural aristocrat holds that we must honor excellence in the political domain as we typically do, and should do, in other domains. Generally speaking, honoring excellence conditions a valuable mode of social interaction in which relevant differences are acknowledged and given their due. The social egalitarian will object that honoring excellence in politics introduces rank and hierarchy that makes it impossible for citizens to relate to one another as equals in other

¹⁵ Bai offers some further reasons for including a democratic component in the political decision-making arrangement. Participation in politics may satisfy the needs of citizens to engage in politics (68), give them an opportunity to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with how they are being ruled (89), and engender various instrumental benefits (89).

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, it is not necessary to build it into the institutional structure. In principle, a fully democratic representative regime could select those who were most fit to rule to govern them. However unlikely their compatibility in practice, natural aristocracy and political equality are not logically incompatible.

ways. That is an important concern. We will return to it in a moment. Here the point is simply that the natural aristocrat has an advantage over the instrumentalist in responding to the social egalitarian insofar as he or she presents an alternative positive vision of the value of the political relationship itself. By contrast, the instrumentalist must either deny that how citizens relate to one another in politics has intrinsic significance itself, or that if it has intrinsic significance, then the value in question is appropriately sacrificed for the sake of producing better political outcomes.

IV. Complex Inequality

Proponents of natural aristocracy value excellence and excellence conflicts with equality. It does not have to be so. We can imagine worlds in which all are excellent and equally excellent at everything they do. But these imaginary worlds imagine away the real and important differences between people, and the fact that some have more competence to do some things than others. Rather than lamenting this inequality, we can celebrate it. Drawing on von Humboldt's ideal of a social union of social unions, Rawls powerfully expresses this optimistic view of human difference and inequality.

The potentialities of each individual are greater than those he can hope to realize; and they fall far short of the powers among men generally. Thus everyone must select which of his abilities and possible interests he wishes to encourage; he must plan their training and exercise, and schedule their pursuit in an orderly way. Different persons with similar or complementary capacities may cooperate so to speak in realizing their common or matching nature. When men are secure in the enjoyment of the exercise of their own powers, they are disposed to appreciate the perfections of others, especially when their several excellences have an agreed place in a form of life the aims of which all accept. (Rawls 1971, 523)

Proponents of social equality could accept that excellence should be celebrated in all the different spheres of life for reasons along the lines

that Rawls adumbrates in this passage, but then insist that politics is different. They could say that in order to be social equals, we must be political equals, even if we are not equal in other ways and in other social domains. Political equality, on this view, is the foundation for social equality, and its realization is necessary if non-political forms of hierarchy are to be acceptable.

The proponent of natural aristocracy rejects this view. Excellence has a claim in politics, he must hold, as well as in other domains. We honor excellence in politics by giving those with greater competence a greater say. But a pressing worry remains. Even if politics is not a domain where all should be on equal footing, there are other social domains in which people should interact on these terms. Further, in non-political social domains, those with greater political competence have no claim in virtue of their political competence to favored treatment. And the worry in question is that political inequality will predictably engender spillover effects into these other domains, thereby damaging social interaction in them. In short, those who are marked as natural aristocrats will be viewed as superiors in social life quite generally. The objectionable bowing and scraping before others that Anderson invokes in the passage quoted from her above will be a predictable consequence of giving some a greater political say than others.

This is indeed a serious concern. Establishing differences of rank in politics might invariably generate social snobbery of this sort. But perhaps not. In closing I want to sketch a reply to this worry, one that no doubt requires a good deal more defense than I will give it here. The reply, in its own way, seeks to bridge the divide between the natural aristocrat and the social egalitarian.

The key to the reply is the thought that the support and celebration of excellence in other domains of social life could serve as a counterforce to the deleterious spillover effects of acknowledging the claims of natural aristocracy in politics. The thought here is a variant on the liberal idea that diverse rankings of value in a society can bolster the self-respect and social standing of its members. To paraphrase Nozick (1974), the most promising way for a society to avoid widespread feelings of social superiority and inferiority is not to try to eliminate recognized differences in merit but to have no common social ranking

of attributes of excellence (245).¹⁷ Rather than establishing a single or dominant society-wide scale, a wide plurality of rankings should be encouraged.¹⁸ If excellence is honored widely outside of politics, then the excellence honored within politics should be less consequential in its impact on the general social standing of citizens.

Honor and rank, on the reply I am advancing, need not be the enemy of a certain kind of equal social standing among citizens, but if the claims of excellence in politics are to be given their due, they need to be tempered by the claims of excellence in other spheres of social life. My thought here has clear affinities with Michael Walzer's (1983) ideal of complex equality. Walzer argued that we can relate as equals in a society when no type of inequality dominates our interactions. His version of social equality does not require the elimination of hierarchy within each sphere of social life, but rather excludes the dominance of any one type of inequality over the others.

Walzer is not a strict political egalitarian. He holds that inequality in political influence is appropriate, but it must arise only from differences in citizens' persuasive abilities when each is given an equal vote and democratic debate is not distorted by money. The proponent of natural aristocracy cannot accept this understanding of unequal political influence. The mere ability to persuade others, while relevant to political rule, is not itself a form of excellence in politics. But the proponent of natural aristocracy can accept the background structural idea behind Walzer's view; namely, that inequalities within different spheres of social life are compatible with equal standing across spheres so long as no form of inequality, whether political or not, dominates the others. Natural aristocracy can be viewed as an integral component of a condition of complex inequality. To secure this condition, the hybrid regime in the BC view likely will need to support excellence in the public culture, abjuring a posture of neutrality between the excellent

¹⁷ Nozick is discussing differences in self-esteem rather than attitudes of social superiority and inferiority, but his point applies here as well.

¹⁸ It might be said that politics is the one social union that includes all citizens and thus should express their deeper equality in some meaningful way. But this can be done in a hybrid regime, where the protection of equal (non) political rights and the administration of equal justice under the law could express the requisite message.

and the base. Support for excellence being vital for valuable social relations across the different domains of social life must not be left to the unregulated cultural marketplace, but should be actively supported by the state.¹⁹ If this is right, then we have come back to the pleasing symmetry in Bai's defense of the BC view.

¹⁹ I do not deny that it is possible that an unregulated and unsubsidized cultural marketplace could adequately honor the claims of excellence in non-political domains. But I think this is unlikely to be the case in practice for reasons similar to those pressed by Hurka (1995).

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