Empathy, Agonism, Deliberation, Democracy

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Abstract: I believe that empathy is important for democracy. To make this case, I investigate the history of the concept of empathy from its origins in 19th Century German aesthetic philosophy, identifying the three key components of emotion, projection and understanding. The confusion surrounding empathy today arises from its use by later scholars in the psychoanalytic and social psychological tradition. As an alternative, I adapt a multi-dimensional model called the Process Model of Empathy. Empirical research demonstrates that the process of empathy can help individuals overcome various biases and affect outgroup evaluations; these are essential for democratic decisions to give equal consideration to all citizens. I then argue that these findings are important for Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism, making two claims. First, agonistic pluralism cannot function without putting the process of empathy at its heart; second, this implies that agonistic pluralism places too much emphasis on conflict. As an alternative, some combination of agonism and deliberation may be preferable, though whatever theory remains persuasive, the process of empathy must play a central role in democracy.

Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the European Consortium of Political Research
Glasgow, UK 2014

[This paper is a working draft; please contact me for before citing it]

It is my contention that the degree to which the political process can engage participants in the process of empathy determines the degree to which it is democratically legitimate (see Morrell 2010). I have made the case elsewhere that empathy is important for a variety of democratic theories, including liberalism, civic republicanism and deliberative democracy (Morrell 2007). In this paper I make the same case regarding another theory of democracy: agonism. In doing so, I make the pragmatic choice to limit my discussion primarily to the work of Chantal Mouffe, though I believe the arguments are just as applicable to other agonists such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig. My main contention remains that the process of empathy is necessary for a well-functioning democracy.
Empathy’s Confusion

The conceptual history of empathy has led to much confusion regarding the word. What we now call empathy began as a concept in German aesthetic theory called *Einfühlung*, literally feeling-in or feeling-into, and though the idea existed for several years, Robert Vischer first names it in his dissertation on aesthetic appreciation written in 1872 and published a year later (Vischer [1873] 1994). Vischer’s concern was to explain how works of inanimate art can appear to involve emotion, and he claims that it is the observer who brings the emotion to the object through a projection: “If…there can be no form without content, then it must be shown that those forms devoid of emotional life…are supplied with emotional content that we—the observers—unwittingly transfer to them” (Vischer [1873] 1994, 89). This initial theory contains three aspects that remain important to contemporary understandings of, and disagreements concerning, empathy: emotions, projection, and appreciation or understanding. It was the various interpretations that subsequent thinkers made of these three elements that led to today’s confusion surrounding empathy.

Edward B. Titchener brought empathy into the English language as a translation of *Einfühlung* during a series of lectures he gave at the University of Illinois in 1909: “Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness, but I feel or act them in the mind’s muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*; there is nothing curious or idiosyncratic about it; but it is a fact that

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1 See Morrell 2010, Chapter 2 for a more complete examination of the historical development of the concept of empathy.
must be mentioned” (1909, 21-22). Titchener acknowledges in later work that he translated *Einfühlung* as empathy by relying upon the Greek word *empatheia*, literally meaning “in suffering or passion,” and formed it on an analogy with sympathy, a term that people often equate with empathy (1924, 417). His description of it in this later work also appears to undergo a slight change:

> We have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, become the explorer; we feel ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking danger; everything is strange, but it is to us that strange experience has come… [t]his tendency to feel oneself *into* a situation is called EMPATHY.

(Titchener 1915, 198 emphasis in original)

This illustration of empathy still includes emotions, projection, and understanding, but feeling oneself into the situation of an explorer in a dark forest has a much different tone than the “mind’s muscle” engaging in an inner imitation that gives rise to the feeling or acting of modesty or pride. Contemporary conceptualizations of empathy resemble the former much more than the latter, though they developed along at least two different paths.

One path in the development of empathy occurs in the application of *Einfühlung* to interpersonal psychological relationships that arises in the work of psychotherapists. Sigmund Freud uses the concept in various ways, including to help explain how putting ourselves into the

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2 Though the Oxford English Dictionary cites Vernon Lee (a pseudonym used by Violet Paget) as the first to use the term “empathy” in a diary entry from February 20, 1904, they are wrong (see Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 337). Lee herself admits that Titchener translated the term (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 1912, 20), and while she wrote her diary entry in 1904, she did not publish it until 1912, by which time Titchener had already made his translation. Also see Pigman’s (1995, 243) and Jahoda’s (2005, 161) arguments to this effect, which I discovered after reaching this conclusion.
place of others relates to the success of the species of the comic he calls “the naïve” ([1905] 1938, 766). He also uses it to explain the mutual ties among group members: “Another suspicion may tell us that we are far from having exhausted the problem of identification, and that we are faced by the process which psychology calls ‘[Einfühlung]’ and which plays the largest part in our understanding of what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people” (Freud [1921] 1924, 66). In both cases Freud tends to focus much more on projection, including active projection, and understanding the other. While emotions still play an important part, Freud imbues Einfühlung with a much stronger sense of cognition than his predecessors.

Not surprisingly, researchers in the field of psychotherapy tended to adopt this understanding of empathy we can describe as putting oneself in the other’s place in order to understand the other’s psychological and emotional state. Carl Rogers argues that empathy is one of the most important traits a therapist can possess:

To sense the client’s inner world of private personal meanings as if it were your own, but without ever losing the “as if” quality, this is empathy, and this seems essential to a growth-promoting relationship. To sense his confusion or his timidity or his anger or his feeling of being treated unfairly as if it were your own, yet without your own uncertainty or fear or anger or suspicion getting bound up in it, this is the condition I am endeavoring to describe. (Rogers 1967, 93)

While emotions, projection and understanding remain central to this definition, Rogers is insistent that empathy occurs when the therapist senses the client’s feelings without allowing the therapist’s own feelings to enter the picture. Heinz Kohut conceptualizes empathy in even more explicitly cognitive terms than Rogers: “[e]mpathy is a mode of cognition which is specifically attuned to the perception of complex psychological configurations” and is actually just “a tool for gathering psychological data” (1971, 300-301). Here there is no sensing of the others’ feelings, simply a clear understanding of the others’ psychological state. Though there are some
differences here, Rogers and Kohut are good examples of how researchers in psychotherapy followed Freud’s lead in defining empathy as a conscious, perceptive, cognitive process of understanding the psychic state of another human. Although this approach retains the central components of emotions, projection and understanding, it emphasizes the understanding that results from putting oneself in the place of another.

The second path in the development of empathy arose in the 1960s when social psychologists began to examine empathy as a possible source for explaining pro-social behavior. Though these researchers do not completely ignore projection or understanding, emotions are much more central and they tend to define empathy as an affective congruence between an observer and a target. Seymour Berger defines empathy specifically as shared emotion in his attempt to provide a framework for studying interpersonal behavior. “Personality theorists and social psychologists generally recognize that the emotional responses of one person (performer) may elicit emotional responses from another (observer). When these emotional responses are similar, the relationship between the performer and observer is described as empathetic, or one of identification” (Berger 1962, 450, emphasis in original). Ezra Stotland gives a similar definition of empathy as “an observer’s reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is experiencing or is about to experience an emotion” (1969, 272). There is a slightly subtle difference here in that Berger’s definition requires “similar” or congruent emotions, while Stotland allows what researchers call valence emotions in response to the emotional state of another. Albert Mehrabian and Norman Epstein, the developers of one of the most popular psychometric measures of empathy, summarize the point the social psychologists were making with their definitions of empathy: “There is a critical difference between the cognitive role-taking process and empathic emotional responsiveness. Whereas the former is the recognition of
another’s feelings, the latter also includes the sharing of those feelings, at least at the gross affect (pleasant-unpleasant) level” (1972, 525). These social and developmental psychologists focus much more on emotions, defining empathy as requiring some form of affective congruence between the emotional states of the observer and the target. Projection of some kind still may occur, as may some sort of understanding or appreciation, but these facets are not as central as the emotional state invoked in one person by the emotional state of another.

**Multi-dimensional Empathy**

The controversy and complexity surrounding empathy has led some scholars to argue that empathy is a multi-dimensional construct. In his work on moral development, Martin Hoffman defines empathy as “*an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own*” (2000, 4 emphasis in original). While Hoffman follows previous social psychologists in focusing on empathy’s affective dimension, he also concerns himself with the “processes underlying empathy’s arousal,” and his theory “assigns special importance to cognition” (2000, 3). Mark H. Davis also conceptualizes empathy as multi-dimensional when he writes, "it is a growing belief among empathy theorists and researchers that there are both affective and cognitive components to the empathic response" (1983a, 113). Instead of defining empathy solely as affective responses or cognitive reactions, the multi-dimensional approach recognizes that affect and cognition are intertwined in empathy. While some theorists stress one aspect over the other, Davis holds that understanding empathy requires an understanding of its many facets. Focusing on one aspect or the other is detrimental to an understanding of empathy and the impact of an empathic disposition on the society and individual.

To address this problem, Davis (1994) has developed what he calls an “organizational model” that represents a multi-dimensional understanding of empathy. Davis divides his model
into four major categories: Antecedents, Processes, Intrapersonal Outcomes, and Interpersonal Outcomes. Antecedents refer to the personal and situational characteristics that can aid or hinder empathy. Processes describe the different ways in which empathy may occur and include noncognitive, simple cognitive, and advanced cognitive processes. Intrapersonal outcomes are “the affective and non-affective responses of the observer that result from the exposure to the target” (Davis 1994, 17). Affective responses can be either parallel (i.e. roughly the same) or reactive (i.e. different). The latter include two primary outcomes: empathic concern and personal distress (Davis 1994, 118-122). Non-affective intrapersonal outcomes include perceptual accuracy of others’ emotional states, attributions for behavior and evaluative judgments of others, the latter two being more important for my argument. Attributional judgments refer to “the kind of causal attribution that the observers offer for the target’s behavior” (Davis 1994, 93). Primarily this refers to whether an observer attributes an actor’s behavior to the personal dispositions of the actor or the situations in which the actor finds herself (Davis 1994, 93-99). Evaluative judgments refer to various stances about the likeability, acceptability, or general characteristics of others, and this especially includes judgments about and tolerance for outgroups (Davis 1994, 100-102). Finally, interpersonal outcomes focus on the relationship between empathy and three general areas: altruism and helping behavior, aggression and anti-social behavior, and social relationships and social behavior.

Davis’s model of empathy possesses several strengths, though we need to supplement it to a degree in order for it to be useful in understanding the importance of empathy for deliberative democracy. The model acknowledges the complex nature of empathy and attempts

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3 While Davis lists anger as one of the reactive affective outcomes in his model, he does not discuss it in the section on reactive outcomes. There are other possible outcomes, such as a feeling of injustice (see Hoffman 2000, 107-108).
to embrace it as a complete concept. The scholarly and everyday uses of the term “empathy” often miss different facets of empathy, just as a group of blind people will describe an elephant only in terms of the parts they can touch. Instead of rejecting empathy as helpful or trying to solve the confusion surrounding it by reducing and rejecting various aspects, he integrates these into a workable model. By developing an integrated model we can understand the relationships among the various aspects and uses of empathy; this also requires that we delineate the various components of empathy, which actually forces greater precision in our discussion of the concept.

For an example of why this is important, we can look to Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of emotions (2001). Nussbaum discusses the relationship between empathy and compassion, and while her substantive conclusion is that “empathy is a mental ability highly relevant to compassion, although it is itself both fallible and morally neutral” (2001, 333), the most important point for my purposes is her definition of empathy. She argues that empathy “involves an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer” (2001, 327). This most closely follows the psychotherapy tradition, which is not surprising as she often relies upon Kohut in her discussion. She also, though, cites evidence from the experimental work of C. Daniel Batson (1991). In a footnote she notes that Batson’s use of empathy is, in fact, equivalent to her use of compassion, and what she defines as empathy, Batson defines as role taking (2001, 331). While Nussbaum clarifies this distinction, it would be better if we had access to more precise terms to describe what we are studying. Batson and his colleagues have taken a step in this direction by describing what they study as “empathic emotion” (see, e.g., Batson, Lishner, Carpenter, et al. 2003, 1192), not simply empathy. Davis’s model opens up the possibility that we can develop a more precise lexicon to describe the various facets of empathy.
The model’s other strength is its integration of both cognitive and affective components. Though often discussed within the context of emotion or affect, empathy is not, in and of itself, an emotion. Though we often speak of “feeling” empathy, what we feel instead is, to name some examples, sympathy or empathic concern, shared embarrassment, anger at injustice, distress for those in need, or the pain of others. Even Batson and his colleagues equate empathic emotions with “feelings of sympathy, compassion and the like” (Batson, Lishner, Carpenter, et al. 2003, 1192). Thus, there is no “empathy” that we feel; instead, empathy is a process through which others’ emotional states or situations have an affect upon us. Davis’s model recognizes this by separating out the processes of “feeling” with others or putting ourselves in their place, from the outcomes that result from these processes. We can empathize with someone else, which may result in feelings of compassion or sympathy, for example, but we never feel empathy. In addition to clarifying affect, the model does not ignore cognition. We may empathize through various mechanisms, and these range from non-cognitive to higher-level cognitive processes. The model also recognizes that the empathic process may have non-affective outcomes that have cognitive implications. For example, that empathizing may affect our evaluative judgments demonstrates that the process does not necessarily result only in affective outcomes. Thus, the organizational model provides a framework that allows us to discuss both the affective and cognitive aspects of empathy.

While these strengths recommend Davis’s model in general, and make it the most appropriate for understanding the role of empathy in deliberative democratic theory, I suggest three improvements. Davis names his framework the “organizational model,” leaving the term “process” to describe one component of the model. I maintain that we should follow Rogers, who believes empathy “to be a process, rather than a state” (1975, 3), by referring to this as the
Process Model of Empathy. This will clarify that empathy is not, in and of itself, a feeling, and will focus our attention on those factors that influence the process, the mechanisms by which it occurs, and the various outcomes that can result from empathizing. Instead of calling the means by which empathy occurs processes, I refer to them as mechanisms. The second improvement is to incorporate more directly the understanding component of empathy as defined by those in the psychotherapy tradition by adding an additional component under the non-affective intrapersonal outcomes that I call empathic understanding. The final improvement is to alter slightly some of the connective arrows in the model so as to indicate possible feedback loops within the different areas and demonstrate that the process must always occur through the mechanisms. I present the resulting model in Figure 1. This Process Model of Empathy allows us to identify those parts of the empathic process that demonstrate the importance of empathy to agonistic democracy.
Figure 1: The Process Model of Empathy

**Antecedents**

The Person
- Biological Capacities
- Individual Differences
- Learning History

The Situation
- Strength of Situation
- Observer/Target Similarity

**Mechanisms**

Noncognitive
- Primary Circular Reaction
- Motor Mimicry

Simple Cognitive
- Classical Conditioning
- Direct Association
- Labelling

Advanced Cognitive
- Language-mediated Associations
- Elaborated Cognitive Networks
- Role Taking

**Affective Intrapersonal Outcomes**

Parallel
Reactive
- empathic concern
- anger
- personal distress

**Non-affective Intrapersonal Outcomes**

Interpersonal Accuracy
Attributional Judgments
Evaluative Judgments
Empathic Understanding

**Interpersonal Outcomes**

Helping
Aggression
Social Behavior

Derived from Figure 1.1: The organizational model (Davis 1994, 13).
The Importance of Empathy: the Empirical Evidence

We now have a model of the empathic process that allows us to discuss the various aspects of empathy in a more complete way, but I have yet made the case that such an account is vital to our understanding of agonistic democracy. Empirical evidence on individual biases and out-group perceptions point to the importance of the empathic process. Further empirical results also indicate that there are important links between cognition and affect in both the process of empathy and moral judgment. These linkages highlight the need for a full conception of the role of emotions and thinking in an agonistic democracy; the process model of empathy gives us insight into how to achieve this.

Individual Biases: Behavioral, Moral, and Motivational Attributions

Early research in social psychology suggested that people tend to attach different influences to their own behavior than to the behavior of others (e.g. Nisbett, Caputo, Legant and Marecek 1973). Attributional bias is the tendency of actors to attribute their successful behaviors to their own personal dispositions and their unsuccessful behaviors to uncontrollable situational factors (see Gould and Sigall 1977 for a review). For example, students will attribute a successful exam to their hard work or intelligence (personal dispositions), while they will attribute failure on an exam to the difficulty of the test, the unfairness of the instructor or the fact that they had to work too late the night before (situational factors). When observing others, however, people tend to generally conclude that others’ behaviors are due to solely dispositional factors, so that an observer will attribute another student failing a test almost exclusively to the student’s personal dispositions or behavior and not to the student’s situation. Another interesting extension of this finding has applied it to in-groups and out-groups (see Tarrant and North 2004, 161-163 for a review of this literature). Members of in-groups tend to attribute the group’s
positive behaviors to the characteristics of the group and its own negative behaviors to other factors. Interestingly, most research appears to indicate that there is not necessarily an opposite derogation of the out-group, though studies examining specific individuals of an out-group do demonstrate some derogation (Tarrant and North 2004).

The presence of behavioral attribution bias alone should concern agonists, but two additional studies raise additional concerns about biases. Krebs and Laird (1998) have shown that actors are more likely to make exculpatory judgments about their own norm-violating behavior than about the moral transgressions others commit. On the political side, Glenn Reeder et al (2005) examine the effects of bias, not on attributions for influences on behavior, but rather on what motivates behavior. What distinguishes their research, and what makes it most important for agonists, is that they specifically examined how this works in relation to political perceptions. In three studies they looked at the motivations people attributed to President Bush and their fellow citizens for going to war in Iraq, while in a fourth they examined the motivations subjects attributed to their fellow citizens for their positions on gay marriage and abortion. The results indicate that people have a “tendency to attribute relatively negative motives to others whose attitudinal positions differ from” their own (Reeder et al 2005, 1507). Those who are strongly concerned about an issue show an even greater tendency toward this bias. “Highly involved respondents were wary of the hidden motives in the opposition and tended to doubt that the opposition was aware of its own motives” (Reeder et al 2005, 1508). Those who disagree about an issue, and especially those who strongly disagree, not only have differences of opinions about the facts of the issue or the approach that will be best in addressing the issue, they also perceive entirely different normative motivations in the actions of the other side. In sum, there are
attributional, moral, and motivational biases that lead people to judge others’ behaviors in ways significantly different from their own.

Subsequent research suggests, however, that the empathic process can help close this gap. Regan and Totten (1975) found that giving people affective role taking instructions could affect this general tendency for actors and observers to make different behavioral attributions. When an experimental manipulation asked observers to pay attention to what a target was feeling, observers tended to make attributions for the target that were relatively more situational than dispositional; inducing subjects to engage in the affective side of the empathic process induced observers to see targets’ behavior more from their own perspective. Many researchers have replicated these findings regarding the ability of affective role taking instructions to make observers’ behavioral attributions much more actor-like (Archer, Foushee, Davis and Aderman 1979; Betancourt 1990; Galper 1976; Wegner and Finstuen 1977).4 Gould and Sigall (1977) also establish the effect of the empathic process on behavioral attributions for successful and unsuccessful behaviors. Melburg, Rosenfeld, Riess and Tedeschi (1984) reach similar conclusions, though they maintain that asking subjects to pay attention only to the feelings of the target is insufficient to produce the effect. They argue that role-playing, which induces subjects to take the broader perspective of the target, is necessary for changes in observers’ attributions of others’ behaviors. The implication of their results is that previous research, while seemingly confining itself to testing a purely affective mode of empathy, actually tested empathy in a broader sense as envisioned in the Process Model. In addition to indicating the importance of an

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4 Interestingly, Storms (1973) discovered that simply reversing point of view through the use of videotaping and replaying a conversation can have the same effect. This suggests that Goodin’s argument for the use of film (among other arts) as a way of inducing people to empathize and engage in internal-reflective deliberation is not without warrant (2003, 178-183.)
empathic process involving both affect and cognition, research on attribution biases also points us toward an understanding of the mechanisms involved in that process. Since simply observing others, and even paying specific attention only to their feelings, does not induce people to alter their attribution biases, we have good evidence that the empathic mechanism of role taking is central to overcoming such biases. Only activating a purposeful, broad process of perspective taking can lead to the reduction of biases.

*Empathy and Out-groups*

A second area that is important for understanding the role of the empathic process in comes from a growing literature demonstrating a relationship between empathy and intergroup relations. Several studies have demonstrated that inducing the process of empathy can positively affect out-group evaluations. Davis, Conklin, Smith and Luce (1996) found that giving subjects affective role-taking instructions increased the likelihood that people would ascribe traits to a member of a stigmatized group similar to the traits they ascribed to themselves, especially positive traits. Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) indicate that general perspective taking can increase positive out-group evaluations and decrease stereotyping over a greater period of time than stereotype suppression instructions, and it does so without creating the hypersensitivity to stereotypes that often accompany stereotype suppression. Batson, Polycarpou, et al. (1997) demonstrate that inducing empathic concern toward specific experimental targets (a woman with AIDS, a homeless man, and a convicted murderer) can generally led to more positive attitudes toward the stigmatized groups of which the targets are members, though the effect regarding the

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5 In this section I focus on intergroup relations and perceptions of out-groups or stigmatized groups. Davis (1994, 100-102) reports various studies that examine the relationship between empathy and liking others, but the conclusions from these studies are mixed, and I believe that “liking” specific others as defined in that literature is less important to democratic deliberation than the intergroup attitudes I discuss in this section.
convicted murderer, not surprisingly, was not as strong.\textsuperscript{6} Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland (2002) discovered that affective role taking instructions increased affective reactive empathy toward a target member of a stigmatized group, in this case drug users, and subsequently increased helping behavior toward the group. Vescio, Sechrist and Paolucci (2003) conclude that subjects given affective role taking instructions showed higher “pro-black” attitudes than those given observation only instructions, though there was no difference between the groups on “anti-black” attitudes. The data from a study by Finlay and Stephan (2000) demonstrate that either having subjects read a first-hand account of discrimination toward an African American or giving subjects affective role taking instructions eliminated differences between in-group and out-group evaluations. A study reported by Davis found that respondents who scored high on a perspective taking sub-scale, when asked to evaluate the 1979 seizure of the American embassy in Iran, were “significantly less likely to offer harsh and punitive evaluations of Iran, and…also more likely to assign the United States some share of the responsibility for the circumstances leading up to the seizure” (Davis 1994, 102). A second study, in which the researcher posited homosexuals and AIDS suffers as the out-groups, concludes that higher dispositional scores on both perspective taking and empathic concern “were significantly associated with more favorable attitudes toward both homosexuals and AIDS sufferers” (Davis 1994, 102). In both cases, predispositions to engage in the empathic process led individuals to have more open evaluations of out-groups. Though the research I have outlined demonstrates a relationship between empathy and out-group evaluation, the relationship appears to be rather complex. Researchers have

\textsuperscript{6} One exception occurred in the AIDS experiment. In addition to testing empathy, the researchers manipulated whether the target was “responsible” for her situation. Women who found out that the target acquired AIDS by having unprotected sex showed a defensive derogation of the target that limited the effects of the reactive affective empathy.
posed that affective role taking instructions, general role taking instructions, reactive affect, parallel affect, changes in behavioral attributions, self-esteem, abstract action construal, and simply reading about discrimination against out-groups can all have positive or mediating effects on out-group evaluations. The one consistent finding, however, is that the process of empathy, in all its complexity, increases the likelihood that people have less negative, or even more positive, evaluations of out-groups.

While the studies cited so far have examined general attitudes, one study examined the relationship between an empathic predisposition and deliberation. Diana Mutz (2002) studied the relationship between Davis’s perspective taking sub-scale and subjects’ openness to contrary opinions during deliberation. She concludes that for “those high in perspective-taking ability, mean levels of tolerance were higher when subjects were exposed to rationales for dissonant views. However, among those low in perspective-taking ability, tolerance levels were lower when subjects were exposed to dissonant views, although the higher variance among this group makes this a suggestive, though not significant difference” (2002, 121). The tentative conclusion from Mutz’s research is that people with higher predispositions for perspective taking are, at the least, more consistently open to opinions that conflict with their own.

**Empathy, Agonism and Deliberation**

The empirical evidence indicates that the process of empathy is important for reducing biases and increasing positive connections, or at least decreasing negative ones, between different groups; this evidence also points the way toward why the process of empathy is highly important for a theory of agonistic democracy. Agonists criticize other theorists of democracy, especially liberal and deliberative democrats, for trying to remove the “political” from politics. While there are several variants of agonism, in this paper I focus on Chantal Mouffe in order to
allow a thorough discussion of her theory. Though I focus on Mouffe, I believe the conclusions I reach apply as well to other agonistic pluralists such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig.

Mouffe begins by explaining that claims to legitimate power have purely pragmatic grounds: “a) if any power has been able to impose itself, it is because it has been recognized as legitimate in some quarters; and b) if legitimacy is not based in an a prioristic ground, it is because it is based in some form of successful power” (1999, 753). Instead of trying to eliminate power, as she claims liberal and deliberative theorists wish to do, democracies must be able “to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values” (Mouffe 1999, 753). In order to explain how this is possible, she draws on the work of Carl Schmitt to make a distinction between “the political”—“the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society” (Mouffe 1999, 754)—and politics—the practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence. Agonistic pluralism recognizes that politics will always contain we/they distinctions along with their potential for conflict, but it maintains that this is a necessary condition of political life because politics depends upon the mobilization of people to action, which in turn depends upon passions “Mobilization requires politicization, but politicization cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed camps with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of the democratic process” (Mouffe 2005, 24-25). Not giving a political outlet to the passions arising from we/they distinctions risks “that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values” (Mouffe 2005, 30).

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For example, Mouffe argues that the attempt to eliminate political conflict in liberal democracies in Europe helps explain the appeal of right-wing populist parties (2005, 69). Democratic politics must not attempt to “eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible,” but it must “mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” (Mouffe 1999, 755-756).

While conflict is an inherent part of politics, it “needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association” (Mouffe 2005, 20). Agonism attempts to create a democratic politics that draws “the we/they distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy” (Mouffe 2005, 14). Mouffe’s key distinction here is between enemies and adversaries. When conflict involves enemies “the we/they confrontation is visualized as a moral one between good and evil, the opponent can be perceived only as an enemy to be destroyed and this is not conducive to an agonistic treatment” (Mouffe 2005, 5). Agonism aims at putting forward an alternative conceptualization of conflict as between adversaries in which there “is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents’ (Mouffe 2005, 20, emphasis mine). This is possible if adversaries “have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy” such as liberty and equality, though they still may disagree on how to interpret and implement those principles (Mouffe 1999, 755). An agonistic democracy must make room for dissent, because its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, yet it must also rely upon a commitment to basic ethico-political principles that allow it to function. “A democratic society requires the allegiance of its citizens to a set of shared ethico-political principles, usually spelled out in a constitution and embodied in a legal
framework, and it cannot allow the coexistence of conflicting principles of legitimacy in its midst” (Mouffe 2005, 122). Beyond this basic requirement for turning enemies into adversaries, Mouffe argues that conflict is both an inherent part of democratic politics, and the basis of its very existence.

The Process Model of Empathy, and the empirical evidence I have adduced, demonstrate both that empathy is absolutely necessary for Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, but also highlights the shortcomings in her theory. Mouffe believes that a simple commitment to basic ethico-political principles of democracy such as liberty and equality can contain the looming spiral that would transform agonistic adversaries into outright enemies. Yet the empirical evidence I have adduced demonstrates that people have biases in their evaluations of others which, though they do not necessarily violate those principles on their face, would certainly heighten the tendency for politics to devolve into a conflict between enemies. There are several possible ways in which the process of empathy is vital, therefore, for Mouffe’s agnostic pluralism. One possibility is that without people engaging in the process of empathy, they would not really commit themselves to the ethico-political principles that she values so highly. Attributional, moral and evaluative biases would prevent citizens from ever recognizing their opponents as legitimate, and since the process of empathy can help overcome these biases, without it Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism would be impossible. Another way to view this is that people may believe that they have committed themselves to these ethico-political principles, and de jure they may hold sway. Yet de facto these biases would lead to subtle (or not so subtle) discriminations that will induce those without power to reject the legitimacy of the democratic system. Agonistic pluralism would break down and we would see the exact same incommensurable conflicts around identity that Mouffe sees in Western liberal democracy and is trying to avoid. Thus, without the process of
empathy, agonistic pluralism cannot survive; yet this fact also demonstrates a shortcoming in
agonistic theory: its fetishizes conflict.

One way to see this is by examining a deliberative (or discursive) theorist who has
responded directly to Mouffe’s position: John Dryzek. While Dryzek accepts the need to
transform antagonism into at least more civilized engagement, he gives three disagreements he
has with her theory. First, he argues that Mouffe paradoxically wants people’s core identities to
energize agonistic exchange because they are the source of passion, and yet “if identities
themselves are highlighted, exchange is more likely to freeze identities than convert them”
(2005, 221). Instead of focusing on identities, exchange should focus on the specific needs of the
individuals or groups. If “individuals can listen to each others’ stories, they might at least accept
one another’s specific needs—which can be reconciled, even when value systems and identities
cannot” (Dryzek 2005, 221). Second, Dryzek argues that his version of discursive democracy
provides a space for contestation that is not as “dispassionate and reasoned” as Mouffe’s image
of liberal or deliberative democracy might imply. Third, Dryzek argues that “Mouffe’s
interpretation of the main task of democracy has no obvious place for collective decision-making
and resolution of social problems” (2005, 221). Agonism focuses on decision-making in order to
argue for the need for more contestation. Dryzek argues that democracy can “combine critical
engagement and collective decision” if it differentiates between the independent public sphere as
the place of contestation that has loose ties to formal political institutions that are the sites of
collective decision-making.

Dryzek’s criticisms of Mouffe have merit. He is correct that contestation around core
identities is more likely to lead to intransigence and antagonism, rather than agonism, but I
believe Mouffe recognizes this. In her latest work she defends the need to retain the political
identities of left/right as the focus of we/they distinctions so that people do not channel their passion through other essentialist identities or non-negotiable moral positions. Dryzek is also correct that his discursive theory, with its focus on a contestation of discourses within the public sphere, does not fit the stereotypical image many critics attribute to deliberative democracy of a dispassionate, reasonable, reasoned debate. The only tests he requires forms of communication to meet are that they are not coercive, connect the particular to the general, and are capable of inducing reflection. While I disagree that the particular always has to immediately and clearly connect with the general, this does not deny that discursive democracy allows more open contestation than other theories of deliberation. Finally, I agree with Dryzek that agonism often pays little attention to the decision-making process within a democracy, and his solution of decoupling the purposes of the public sphere from formal political institutions is promising.  

Though I generally agree with Dryzek’s criticisms of Mouffe, I believe that he misses one fundamental critique of the agonistic pluralism model. The political most certainly involves conflict and contestation, and any attempt to eliminate it completely raises the possibility of oppression, exclusion and hegemonic blindness as agonists recognize. By conceptualizing democratic legitimacy as consensus (or near consensus), rational agreement, reasonable agreement, or other forms of a rationally constructed public will, many liberal and deliberative theories at least tend toward exclusion and the evisceration of politics. Yet this does not mean that politics must always be about contestation. People may agree about some goal that they want to achieve, and yet they still must coordinate to achieve this goal; this is politics. People may confront a new issue or problem that is unclear, and they may engage in a discussion to examine the various sides of the issue; this is politics. It is even possible that people may eventually

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Of course, Habermas (1996) and others do this as well.
overcome their disagreement, for example by agreeing that citizens have the right to vote
regardless of gender, and even if the agreement comes about at the end of a process of
contestation, the very possibility of agreement is also itself politics. While certain theories of
democracy may drift toward exclusion and repression by highlighting rationality and consensus,
agonism tends to drift toward the reification of conflict as the only option available in democratic
politics. Democratic politics must work toward allowing agonistic contestation between
adversaries so as to prevent an all out fight among enemies, but it must also be open to the
possibility that people can overcome their antagonisms and reach agreement under non-coercive,
non-repressive conditions.

One possibility for allowing both agonism and agreement is to combine agonistic
pluralism and deliberation within one system. Simona Goi argues that combining agonism and
deliberation would secure “an opportunity to voice alternative standpoints and to make sure that
they are heard in all their distinctive ‘otherness’” (Goi 2005, 80, emphasis in original). She
maintains that disagreements often arise because of gaps between people’s lifeworlds: “This gap
cannot be bridged simply by forcing participants in deliberation to limit their arguments to the
commonly shared rational premises of communication, as this denies dissenting voices
recognition of their perspectives and identities on their own terms” (Goi 2005, 80, emphasis in
original). Combining agonism and deliberation appears promising, but there remains one vital
question that even Dryzek highlights. Even if democracy should not eliminate conflict, it is
important that the conflict does not degenerate into antagonism; this requires that democratic
citizens display a particular attitude toward one another (agonism) or meet certain criteria in
communicating (discursive democracy). Dryzek points out that agonism “is vulnerable to
questions about where exactly the required attitude should come from, especially where groups
asserting identity themselves feature hierarchy and repression” (2005, 221). Monique Deveaux makes similar a similar argument that “agonistic democrats have done little to defend the link between agonism and greater respect for citizens’ moral, religious and cultural differences” (1999, 5). Some agonists seem to assume that a more open process will allow more agonistic contestation, but Deveaux points out that this is only a possibility. What is necessary is the stronger claim that an agonistic system could actually foster inclusion and mutual respect, but this claim “will remain an ineffectual bit of rhetoric in the absence of clearer ideas about how (or indeed whether) we can formalize such inclusion and recognition” (Deveaux 1999, 14).

What both Dryzek and agonistic democrats miss, I want to argue, is that the way we can combine both respectful contestation and the possibility for cooperation and legitimate decision-making is by placing the process of empathy at the heart of democratic politics. Political contestation among citizens who engage in the process of empathy can be adversarial and respectful without requiring a totalizing notion of rationality. It is not only open to a variety of affective and cognitive forms of communication, it requires them, and also provides a criterion by which we can judge whether or not forms of communication are legitimate that itself does not rely upon a particular moral or rational foundation. While allowing for disagreement and contestation, it retains the possibility for cooperation and agreement.

**Empathy and Democracy**

We must place the process of empathy at the heart of our understanding of democracy. Whether that understanding is agonistic, deliberative, or some combination of the two, the empathic process can mitigate against biases and negative outgroup evaluations that would undermine the very possibility of democracy and democratic legitimacy. While here I have focused on Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism, I think the main arguments are just as
applicable, if not more applicable, to other agonistic theorists. For William Connolly agonistic pluralism entails “a respect for the persistent diversity of the human condition”, what he calls a “bicameral orientation” towards new articulations of difference, manifested in a willingness to engage diverse others as they advance that articulation in the public realm (2005, 4). He sees the task of the political as securing a positive “ethos of engagement” in relation to new movements which alters existing assumptions, that is, a positive attitude towards attempts at pluralization. Connolly suggests we do so through the cultivation of two essential virtues: agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Wenman 2008). It is quite obvious that the ethos of engagement, agonistic respect and critical responsiveness Connolly requires of democratic politics would be highly unlikely to exist without the process of empathy. Bonnie Honig also recognizes that agonistic pluralism requires the “arts of the self” and “ethico-political virtues of respect and generosity” which Connolly supposes. The primary emphasis in her work, however, seems to be the effect agonistic disturbances will have on our understandings of our political foundations. She claims that a condition of respect towards difference is said to emerge only after we have revised the means by which read and interpret our political foundations. Yet even if this is true, it would be difficult for this type respect to emerge without the process of empathy also occurring, and even more importantly, how the disruptions she desires would even gain any traction without people overcoming the biases and outgroup judgments they currently hold. Thus, even for Honig, I believe that the process of empathy must exist if agonism is to function as she posits it ought. While a more thorough evaluation of my claim here is warranted, this is initial evidence that the...
process of empathy will be just as important for Connolly’s and Honig’s theories as for Mouffe’s. The process of empathy has to be a central part of an agonistic theory of democracy.

References


