Pathologies of Political Judgment and Democratic Deliberation

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Theorists of deliberative democracy maintain that genuine dialogue is premised on the mutual respect of participants, yet a great deal of what passes for civic discourse even in mature democracies takes place among political actors who avowedly do not respect one another. This dissertation investigates psychological obstacles to mutual respect, and mutual understanding, in an effort to enhance possibilities for democratic deliberation. It identifies two such obstacles in political narcissism and ressentiment, which it construes as pathologies of political judgment. More generally, the dissertation argues for a self-consciously hermeneutical and psychoanalytically informed approach to deliberation, one that seeks a deeper understanding of our interlocutors in deliberation so as to carry on a more fruitful dialogue with them. Accordingly, it argues that speech is distorted when it does not align with the subjective intent of the speaker, even when that intent is unconscious or unknown to him. It contends that a depth hermeneutical mode of deliberation is necessary to engage in genuine communicative action, and suggests a role for psychoanalytically informed rhetoric in deliberation. Finally, it offers a methodological sketch of what a depth hermeneutical approach might look like when applied not only toward understanding one’s interlocutor, but also toward offering justificatory arguments vis-à-vis the shared ethical traditions and discourses that give legitimacy to political action. It suggests we need to read between the lines of tradition to ensure that minority discourses are not overshadowed, just as we need to look beneath the explicit claims of our interlocutors if we wish to understand them.
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1. Introduction – Deliberation, Consensus, and the Condition of Mutual Respect

There was an advocate, well respected by the bench and bar of Alabama, whose custom it was to argue cases open-collared, without a necktie. He went one morning for a walk, and had gone no great distance before he happened upon the Chief Justice of that state’s Supreme Court. He’d argued a recent case before the Chief Justice, without a tie as always, but to no avail: the court had found against his client and, as a result, a trial verdict he’d won was overturned. “Good morning, Mr. Chief Justice,” the lawyer said, pausing a moment and taking the jurist’s arm. “Mr. Chief Justice, let me ask you,” he said, “did you rule against me in that case because I didn’t wear a tie?” “Why, no,” the Chief Justice answered. “I see,” the lawyer replied, “I’m sorry to hear that—because that would have been a much better reason than the one you gave.”

Justification, that giving of reasons, is at the heart of democratic theory today. “The practice of deliberation is an ongoing activity of reciprocal reason-giving,” a pair of prominent theorists put it, and “the reasons have to be mutually justifiable.” The “deliberative approach now dominates the theory – though not yet the practice – of democracy.” And according to that theory, the deliberative process by which political

1 Adapted from an anecdote – apparently a true one – told by Justice Anthony Kennedy, 00:09:30-00:10:45 (Aug. 19, 2010), available at http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/295166-2
2 See, e.g., Simone Chambers, “Theories of Political Justification,” Philosophy Compass, Vol. 5, No. 11 (2010), pp. 893-894 (justification has been brought into the “center of contemporary liberalism”).
action is decided and made legitimate must result in a meeting of the minds: “democratic procedures have to convince.”\textsuperscript{5} The “legitimacy of political action turns not on whether it serves all citizens’ interests equally well, but on whether it is grounded in reasons that all can accept as valid.”\textsuperscript{6} Its aspiration to convince, to win consensus, distinguishes the theoretical project of deliberation from the merely aggregative model of democratic decision-making. For it was always possible to count votes, along the lines that Schumpeter and Downs suggested.\textsuperscript{7} Deliberation was advanced as an alternative to this approach, with the conviction that reasoned agreement among democratic citizens was possible. Whether under the paradigm of Rawls or Habermas or others – for our purposes their differences are less important – the “rationality” of the deliberative procedures was supposed to guarantee certain liberal values while maximizing popular sovereignty, achieving thereby a reconciliation between competing liberal and democratic objectives. Hence Habermas, for example, could say that “popular sovereignty and human rights go hand in hand” and claim the “co-originality of civic and private autonomy,”\textsuperscript{8} in spite of the longstanding tension between these objectives in the history

of liberal and democratic thought respectively. A form of democratic deliberation, whose procedures exclude (through whatever structure or device) outcomes contrary to the basic rights of concern to liberals, may claim to protect those rights while maximizing popular participation in political decision-making.

But as we saw from our initial anecdote, although deliberation aims at agreement and requires reciprocal reason-giving to achieve it, reasons can easily be dismissed as frivolous, untenable or invalid by deliberative participants – even in what Rawls regards as the “exemplar of public reason,” the judicial setting. Partly out of frustration with this reality, theorists of deliberative democracy have recently turned to rhetoric in the hope of reinvigorating deliberative processes which have been framed, for the most part, in terms of winning a “rational” consensus. Advocates of rhetoric believe the “force of the better argument” – at least its rational force – is not enough to win consensus, and thus that persuasion is required to achieve it, or else they simply believe it inevitable that deliberation is infused with emotional factors. These theorists therefore stress the role of “irrational” factors in deliberation. In doing so, they depart from the regulative ideal of deliberative theory, which imagines deliberation to be an emphatically rational enterprise,

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and resists the admission of “non-rational” elements like rhetoric or emotion as potentially destabilizing and manipulative. Asked by his biographer about the relation between logic and rhetoric, a spritely, 96-year-old Gadamer responded, “Certainly rhetoric today is almost a cuss-word!”\textsuperscript{12}

Responding to the difficulties involved in offering public reasons that all can accept, others are beginning to abandon the goal of consensus altogether. Georgia Warnke has recently criticized this strain of deliberative theory for retreating from the goal of consensus, bemoaning the fact that, for Joshua Cohen, “rational consensus” is no longer the “aim of deliberation,” nor is “aggregating votes simply a last resort.”\textsuperscript{13} “Instead,” Warnke explains, the public reasons to be offered in deliberation are no longer “reasons that are persuasive to all,” but “simply reasons [that] ‘others can be reasonably expected to acknowledge as reasons.’”\textsuperscript{14} This leads Warnke to question “the point of deliberating” at all:

Why assume greater legitimation for policy decisions just because we exchange different public reasons and considerations that we all recognize as such? Why deliberate if we need not agree or can agree in some partial way?...When deliberators do not succeed in convincing others, this failure encourages them to change their preferences or to rethink their proposals and reasons in a further attempt at forging consensus. If, however, they need not even try to convince others or if they can maintain their own (sufficiently public) reasons for agreeing to a policy or decision[,] why need they deliberate at all?\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Id., p. 760.
The problem cited by Warnke is certainly not limited to the theorists she targets for criticism. James Bohman, too, for example, in pursuit of a notion of “plural public reason” that sufficiently democratizes the notion of public reason offered by Rawls, claims “not [to be] arguing against any role for unity in democratic polities,” but then minimizes the concept of unity (i.e., consensus) to such an extent that “democratic unity requires only that participants enter into public deliberation with everyone,” not that they can agree.

This dissertation will argue that a retreat from deliberation’s goal of consensus is unwarranted, but it does sympathize with those who stress “emotion” in deliberation because they have placed their finger on a problem: that “irrationality,” or forms of judgment that do not align with the cool “rational” ideal pervasive in most deliberative theorizing, is a central factor in the failure of “reciprocal reason-giving” in deliberative discourse. That is to say, there may be causes other than the weakness of our arguments (if weakness means insufficiently well-reasoned) whenever our reasons fail to convince. Now this could not be more obvious, of course, given our everyday experience; and Rawls himself is well aware that “people are often irrational and not very bright,” and that “this mixed with logical errors leads to conflicting opinions.” But Rawls wants to work “within ideal theory” and hence proceeds on the view that disagreement, when it


happens, is “reasonable.” This dissertation, for its part, contends that irrational factors are at play which, if ignored, not only render deliberation’s goal of consensus a much more elusive one, but make genuine deliberation impossible from the very beginning. We believe, moreover, that we cannot ignore them and focus instead on the somewhat ethereal phenomenon of “reasoned disagreement” as Rawls does – for if we do not attend to the irrational obstacles facing deliberation from the beginning, the enterprise itself will not get off the ground and we will be left with the parody of deliberation that passes for civic discourse even in “mature” Western democracies.

In so saying, we are quite mindful of Iris Marion Young’s point that “norms of deliberation…privilege speech that is dispassionate and disembodied…tend to presuppose an opposition between mind and body, reason and emotion,” and “tend falsely to identify objectivity with calm and absence of emotional expression.” We do not wish to perpetuate this image, as if irrationality or emotion as such must be crushed beneath the boot of reason, or somehow domesticated, if deliberation is to transpire and flourish. Indeed, certain models of dialogue which we will later consider – psychoanalysis for instance – are thoroughly, and fruitfully, infused with feeling. But not all emotion, not every psychological constellation, is conducive to deliberation.

Young is therefore right in her basic warning. If, as she suggests, the “speech culture of women and racial minorities…tends to be more excited and embodied, more valuing the expression of emotion,” and so on, then such a vision of deliberation may

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18 Id.
indeed have “exclusionary” implications. While much in sympathy with this concern, this dissertation takes no position on the question whether “emotion and partisan thinking [are] morally appropriate elements of democratic communication,” or whether deliberation should be guided by a regulative “ideal of dispassionate, reflective exchange.”

What this dissertation does contend is that certain irrational and psychological factors, which we construe as pathologies of political judgment, preclude genuine deliberation altogether. The factors we address here, political narcissism and ressentiment, arise from a problematic self-understanding – in effect, pathological political judgment arises in those instances from pathological notions of identity. And since identity is largely interpretive, it might be said that political narcissists and those harboring political actors feelings of ressentiment are in need not only of a psychological intervention but a hermeneutic one, for they must be brought to a rather radical reinterpretation of themselves – their identities, their standing vis-à-vis their fellow citizens – before they can overcome these obstacles and become full-fledged deliberative participants.

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20 Id.
22 Id., p. 1025.
Political judgment is certainly being studied in myriad other ways by contemporary theorists. Indeed, this dissertation grew out of a frustration with extant models of practical reasoning and political judgment: above all, “to mention a nowadays fashionable suggestion,” with “Aristotelian phronesis.”

Thus in a polemical article, I attacked a pair of international relations theorists for “urg[ing] scholars of IR to drop the inquiry concerning the foundations for knowledge in their discipline,” pointing out that to do so would be to surrender the field’s aspirations to social scientific status and theoretical rigor. We would then find ourselves, I worried, with no way to distinguish the expertise of the statesman from the insights of social scientists or philosophers. In essence I accused them of exhorting the field to “keep muddling through” with research while paying no mind whatever to the status of its scholarship as knowledge, and without a clear notion of theory’s relation to practice, if that distinction could even be conceived of meaningfully under their proposed agnosticism. In so doing, I compared their vision of IR to the “horse sense,” the “practical wisdom,” the phronesis which, according to Leo Strauss (and Aristotle), characterizes the statesman. To my mind, that was a damning comparison. For while I admired Strauss’s dedication to the question “what can we learn from political theory?,” I

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took issue with his (stated) conclusion that “I have not the slightest doubt as to the possibility of devising an intelligent international policy…without having any recourse to political philosophy.”

Obviously the article that raised my ire did not exactly prove to have cataclysmic implications for the field of IR. But it was because I was so interested in the relation between theory and practice that I reacted so strongly. For that reason, in the prospectus to this dissertation, I initially framed this project as an investigation of political judgment that would take issue with *phronesis* as a model of practical judgment that can supposedly function independently of theory. But as I engrossed myself in those issues, I realized that no frontal assault on *phronesis* and no simple-minded resuscitation of a notion of theory that rules over practice was possible – at least not in the space of a dissertation and with any intellectual honesty. As Tom Spragens said to me in a conversation at the time: “these waters are very deep,” and so they are. Since then, a few scholars beat me to the punch in questioning the much-valorized notion of *phronesis*,

though more work remains to be done.

But as I cast about, it occurred to me that the attractiveness of *phronesis* as a model for judgment might have arisen from reasons other than philosophical rigor. It occurred to me that there were certain political and psychological motives that may be

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behind the widespread embrace of that model. For one thing, to posit a notion of political judgment that is explicitly untethered to theory – as various tendentious readings of Aristotle have suggested, completely ignoring earlier debates wherein, e.g., 19th century Kantian readers of Aristotle found in *phronesis* all the rudiments of Kant’s practical reason and rule-based approach\(^\text{29}\) – is to hold an extremely permissive notion of judgment. It is anti-authoritarian and emphatically individualist. One may say this is all to the good for liberal democracy, but what implications does this have for deliberation and collective decision-making? To the extent that this version of *phronesis* involves the application of guiding principles at all, the application swallows the rule and leaves a great deal to individual whims.

It struck me that such an account of judgment, which leaves so much (perhaps everything) to the individual had a kind of protective effect: it insulates the individual from criticism and from moralizing judgment especially. It struck me as strongly analogous to narratives from identity politics wherein a great deal is left to individual discretion as well; for example, Judith Butler argues that gender is a social fabrication and urges the subversion of such roles by individuals.\(^\text{30}\) It struck me that the resistance to an idea of political theory that guides (and judges) political practice, to a notion of social scientific knowledge that guides (and assesses) scholarship in IR, to a notion of gender that has a basis in anything other than social contingencies (and seeks to define what gender roles “are”) – that, even if each of these characterizations are warranted (as I am


perfectly prepared to acknowledge), in each context they at the same time function unmistakably to protect the individual from judgment. These approaches to various forms of discourse serve to foreclose criticism, and to preclude deliberation about whatever is within the purview of the individual. Indeed, the main point of the IR scholars I took to task was that we should *stop talking* about the foundations of knowledge.31 They wanted to banish such discourses to the realm of impoliteness or taboo.

These patterns struck me as strongly analogous to a tendency at the political level as well, which (through the work of this dissertation) I have come to understand as “narcissistic.” I mean the tendency in discourse to regard the expression or existence of differing political views as in effect a personal attack. It seemed to me that this form of responsiveness could only be premised on the sense that one’s political views “occupy the field” exclusively, and hence to preclude that openness to dialogue that is characteristic of deliberation. Within such an outlook, the interlocutor with whom one disagrees, besides being a fool, is understood as a hostile entity. American political discourse, with pundits on the Right and Left who alternately mock, attack, and react with a pose of indignant victimhood toward one another, seemed an immediate resource replete with this sort of thing.

In any event, to return more seriously to theory, it struck me that these patterns evidenced deep pathologies with implications for those whose aim it is to encourage

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genuine deliberation. I sensed psychological motives for clinging to narratives and models of judgment that leave supreme discretion to the individual, over and beyond the philosophical arguments for those ideas. And I thought that the behavior whereby so many partisans of Right and Left never genuinely converse but merely trade barbs is symptomatic of psychological barriers to deliberation. So much for the genesis of this project in its current iteration

As one deliberative theorist has noted, “[p]sychological barriers to deliberation are especially powerful in conflicted societies” and “if parties do not trust and respect each other, if they lack motivation, if they do not perceive a common ground…then deliberation may fail even in the most ideal institutional settings.”32 Indeed, Gutmann and Thomson have pointed out that “moral accommodation” is premised “on a value that lies at the core of reciprocity and deliberation in a democracy,” namely “mutual respect,” a value that “demands more than toleration” and “requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees.”33

Accordingly, we proceed to identify two such psychological barriers: in Chapter Two we turn to the psychoanalytic literature to identify a political analogue to what is known as narcissism (or, more clinically, “narcissistic personality disorder”). The defining feature of narcissism is grandiosity, a view of the self that exaggerates one’s own importance, entitlement, and specialness vis-à-vis the servile, imperfect other. The

result is that fellow members of the polity, potential participants in a deliberation, are not taken seriously (indeed, are denigrated), and hence the value of respect is absent. Not only are opposing views dismissed because it is difficult for the political narcissist to believe that any views of importance could come from the inferior other, but the views of fellow citizens are generally not even understood by such actors: fatal to any attempt at dialogue or deliberation is the concomitant lack of empathy that accompanies their grandiosity.

We notice that the identities of once-persecuted minorities often harden in this way. Many will remember Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s controversial expression of “hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would, more often than not, reach a better conclusion than a white male.”34 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sotomayor was also “always struggling with the fear that her Puerto Rican identity and experience merited less respect in the world of the white male judiciary,” so much so that she admitted “[e]ach day on the bench I learn something new about the judicial process and about being a professional Latina woman in a world that sometimes looks at me with suspicion.”35 But the same could be said, for example, of the reactionary hardening of “white male” identity that has occurred in recent decades.36 And it scarcely needs saying that dominant political groups, too, can suffer from narcissism. Narcissism seems almost

35 Id.
coextensive with the attitudes of various fascist movements that came to power in the
early 20th century, for instance.

Whatever the specific example, Spragens has perceptively pointed out that
“preoccupation with group identity” can foster a sort of “narcissistic particularism.”37
Indeed, it can preclude deliberation altogether, as we will contend. It can lead to
pretensions that make the “mutual respect” required for deliberation impossible and can
deafen political actors to opposing voices altogether. Dryzek classes the “toughest kinds
of political issues” as the “mutually contradictory assertions of identity that define a
divided society,” and finds “[t]he basic problem in all these cases [to be] that one identity
can only be validated or, worse, constituted by suppression of another.”38 Just such an
identity would be classifiable as (politically) narcissistic.

We further contend that political narcissism corresponds to a pathological version
of phronesis. According to the regnant view of phronesis, the “application [of a norm or
value]” in action and here in the deliberation that precedes political action “is neither a
subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but
codetermines it as a whole from the beginning.”39 Gadamer’s reading of phronesis has
been criticized as leading to a thoroughgoing subjectivism, giving maximum latitude
(perhaps infinite) to the phronimos in his capacity as interpreter, and reducing the

37 Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Ideals (Lanham: Rowman &
38 John S. Dryzek, “Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia,”
guidance given by norms, values, and principles, to a nullity. But Gadamer constantly exhorts the reader to “be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” And however this may be as a matter of theory, for political narcissists there is no possibility of “being aware of one’s own bias” or experience another’s perspective “in all its otherness” because their grandiosity blinds them to other points of view. Hence, whatever the problems of phronesis are as a matter of theory or in Gadamer’s specific account, political narcissism presents in practice the very pathology that many commentators are worried about – the reading out of shared norms and the subjectivization of political judgment according to the idiosyncrasies of the individual.

In an effort to address this problem and clear an obstacle from the path to deliberation, we will pursue an analogy from the psychoanalytic tradition. We suggest that political narcissism is basically analogous and coextensive, at the political level, with narcissistic personality disorders or so-called disorders of the self at the level of the individual psyche. Hence we will embark on an investigation of the ‘self psychology’ of Heinz Kohut and seek a cure in a political analogue to Kohut’s empathy. We contend that those who are least likely to listen in a democracy, political narcissists, lacked the political equivalent of parental mirroring and at some point in their history have felt not only excluded from the political discourse but unseen and voiceless; even in the case of “dominant” political actors, we believe there is an underlying feebleness that produces

40 Id., pp. 271-272.
their narcissism. We therefore propose, following Kohut, that precisely these political actors need to be radically listened to, and should be the recipients of our best efforts to empathize, in the hope that they will over time develop the political analogue of “psychic structure” and internalize the values of respect and reciprocity.

In Chapter Three, we identify another psychological barrier to deliberation in the phenomenon of ressentiment, wherein “weak” or marginal political actors, unable to express their political grievances, are forced through some exigency to occupy a position of social or political subservience, and consequently develop hostility toward the values dear to those they see as their oppressors. For example, certain forms of populist hatred of the rich or “class warfare” can be understood as ressentiment, as might certain radical forms of feminism or racial separation (though anti-feminist and other reactionary movements, for example, could be understood in the same terms just as easily). As Scheler maintained, “ressentiment must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.”

Hence, those afflicted with political ressentiment not only lack the “trust” necessary to deliberation, but are engulfed in a hostility to other political actors. Again, in an effort to address this problem, we explore ressentiment as it appears in the thought of Nietzsche and Max Scheler. We will look particularly at the examples of Tea Party (whose formative discourse recalls the “paranoid style” that Richard Hofstedter

41 Max Scheler, Ressentiment (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), p. 28.
famously attributed to pseudo-conservative movements in American politics), as well as feminist literature’s own self-conscious struggle with *ressentiment*. We will seek a cure for this malady by setting free the aggressive impulses within the context of a limited, and transitional, political agonism. We further propose that “political correctness,” far from encouraging civility, tends to suppress the airing of grievances and straitjackets discourse in the first instance, often leading to *ressentiment* and the perpetuation of such discourse censorship. Rawls urges that “[t]hose who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them”\(^{42}\) and we suggest that too often legitimate grievances are transformed into pathological *ressentiment*, culminating in outright hostility toward political groups, when they might have found better expression through a robust, even agonistic airing. Contrary to those who find deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy hopelessly at odds, we argue (citing Nietzsche) that the very structure of agonism has prospects for curing the malady of *ressentiment* and may serve as a transitional phase in developing citizens’ capacities for deliberation.

And as political narcissism corresponded to a pathological version of *phronesis*, we argue also that *ressentiment* corresponds to a pathological version of *critique*, where the aim is no longer genuine social criticism but becomes a vengeful tearing down of institutions and opponents. It has certainly been a long-standing problem of post-structuralism’s critical bent that “as numerous critics have noted…poststructuralist

analysis of power and subjectivity provides us with no real way of drawing distinctions between political ideals and movements that might be more legitimate, freedom-enhancing, rational, and so on, than others.” But whatever the theoretical basis for that problem as something that characterizes critique as a mode of reasoning, we argue that ressentiment is at the root of a great deal of pathological critique (the distortion of genuine critical efforts) that occurs in practice.

Hence, we argue that more can be accomplished practically by addressing these two “psychological barriers” to deliberation (narcissism and ressentiment), than by arguing about the theoretical robustness of the modes of judgment they distort (phronesis and critique), as I had been minded to do at the outset of this project. As Spragens has rightly observed, “what is needed…is not some reprise of the epistemological battle between Plato and the sophists…[but instead a way] of distinguishing healthy from corrupt forms of political rhetoric.” And in effect what we are doing is attempting to contribute to the health of the “democratic subject”: we think the “conditions of [the] existence of the democratic subject” require the citizen to be free of narcissism or ressentiment. Even Mouffe, who opposes the entire deliberative project, abhors the “[e]xtreme forms of individualism [that] have become widespread [and] threaten the very

45 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 96
social fabric” of Western democracies.\textsuperscript{46} We argue that narcissism and \textit{ressentiment} are psychological manifestations, perhaps even significant causes, of this very individualism.

But in attempting to do this, we cannot fail to recognize that both these pathologies are understood as arising from conditions of oppression. That is to say, they almost invariably arise from some form of \textit{exclusion} from the political and deliberative process. Danielle Allen has emphasized the necessity of building trust between (potential) participants in the deliberative process, which she rightly sees as a \textit{condition} for deliberation rather than its outcome.\textsuperscript{47} We cannot simply clear a few psychological obstacles from the path of deliberation and throw political actors together, hoping for the best. We must also do what we can to make deliberation far more inclusive, far more welcoming to minorities, lest we perpetuate the pathologies we have sought to identify. We must not run afoul of Derek Walhof’s complaint that while “deliberative theorists have increasingly paid attention to the conditions that make democratic deliberation possible…in so doing, however, they have largely neglected what it is that deliberation actually does.”\textsuperscript{48}

Therefore, we contend in Chapters Four and Five that deliberation must become more “hermeneutical.” Actually, as we hope to show in Chapter Four, the work of interpretation is inseparable from political judgment and from some form of hermeneutics in any event. But what we mean to suggest is that we need approaches to deliberation

\textsuperscript{46} Id.
that are far more sensitive to our interlocutors than those currently expressed. And here
again, we agree with Young and others that extant modes of deliberation very well may
work to exclude minorities. Accordingly, in Chapter Four, inspired by the so-called
“hermeneutics of suspicion,” we urge a “depth hermeneutical” approach to deliberation
and put forth psychoanalysis as a model of dialogue that “open[s] itself equally to all
ways of making claims and giving reasons.”

In particular, we suggest that we can often misunderstand our interlocutors if we
are heedless of their psychological motivations. Indeed, we suggest that citizens often do
not even understand themselves and hence make political claims premised on
inaccessible motives. We advert to Habermas’s flirtation with psychoanalysis, which has
gone largely undeveloped, to point out that (similar to what Timur Kuran calls
“preference falsification” and “insincere speech,” i.e., lying) a deliberating subject
unaware of psychological deformations or neuroses of various kinds practices what
Habermas calls “systematically distorted communication.” Analogizing political
hermeneutics to the treatment of a neurotic patient, Habermas suggested that a “patient
cannot come to a better self-understanding through an internal dialogue since this

University Press, 1970), p. 32. In commenting on the “three exercises of suspicion” undertaken by
Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, Ricoeur finds the “intention they had in common…the decision to look upon
the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false consciousness.’” Hence the hermeneutics of suspicion
searches for “truth as lying.” Id., p. 33.
51 Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*
pp. 529-544, at p. 538.
53 Jürgen Habermas, “The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality,” in Josef Bleicher (ed.), *Contemporary
dialogue will merely” perpetuate the “original deformations.” Hence, for Habermas, a political psychoanalysis “must rely…upon an explanatory theory that can rise above the restrictions of the deformed context itself,” i.e., “it requires a critical theory of society” over and above that society’s own political discourse. We suggest that a psychoanalytically informed approach to deliberation can lead to greater insight among deliberative participants, and we consider the Gadamer-Habermas debate to see both the promise and the limits of the psychoanalytic model of understanding. We find the debate inconclusive, but demonstrate that psychoanalysis exists “between empathy and interpretation,” and even if an understanding of our deliberative interlocutor cannot proceed in the manner of romantic hermeneutics that Gadamer rejects, a psychoanalytic approach nonetheless promises insights admitted even by Gadamer’s account: that an encounter with the “analyst” can lead to insights about ourselves of which we were unaware. Therefore we contend that psychoanalytically informed deliberation is a viable model for addressing the “distortions” in political communication that Habermas identifies.

Finally, in Chapter Five, we conclude with an exploratory sketch that attempts to give a sense of what a methodology in the “hermeneutics of suspicion” might look like. As with earlier hermeneutical theorists, such as Schleiermacher, who supplied various “rules of thumb” to guide the interpretation of texts, we highlight the need for some basic principles according to which a “depth hermeneutics” might be carried out not only vis-à-

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55 Id.
vis our deliberative interlocutors (who were the subject of Chapter Four and who, it was suggested, would be appropriate for interpretation under a psychoanalytic model) but vis-à-vis the traditionary discourse that characterizes day-to-day deliberation. That is to say, when citizens deliberate, we assume they do so according to a shared set of norms which we refer to as “Tradition.” As Michael Walzer has characterized the practice of social criticism, they do not go outside tradition for critical purchase but look within Tradition. We go a step further and suggest the need to read between the lines of Tradition, so that minority discourses and marginalized groups are not overshadowed by dominant narratives. The hermeneutics we defend, inspired by Leo Strauss’s approach to the reading of esoteric texts, and by the psychoanalytic aim of bringing the unconscious to consciousness, is essentially a form of immanent critique – it works within the text of Tradition and attempts to read between the lines.

We thus try to sketch out a hermeneutical approach inspired by and abstracted from Leo Strauss, according to which Tradition can be read as an esoteric text; and one inspired by psychoanalysis, according to which Tradition can be conceived of as a psyche that reaches compromises – pathological or healthy – between various discourses, roughly corresponding to Id and Superego. In both of these, our aim is supply a canon of construction, i.e., some rough principles of interpretation according to which minority voices within Tradition are not drowned out of the discourse but are made to rise to the surface. In our Strauss-inspired approach, which we understand as a liberal esotericism, we place particular emphasis on Strauss’s assumption of “perfect speech” (“logographic necessity”) in the reading of texts, and show that this emphasis on the coherence of the
text (an approach known as “coherentism”) compels him to interpret every bit of text. Hence, on this analogy, the minority aspects of Tradition must be given due weight. For the Straussian reader – contrary to one of Strauss’s own statements but fully in line with his actual principles of textual interpretation and his own practice – Homer never nods, i.e., nothing in the text is a mistake. This, of course, has led to many controversial interpretations in within the academic history of political thought. But abstracted from his assumptions of intentional authorial esotericism, and applied as a mode of interpreting Tradition in deliberative discourse, such a modified “Straussian” approach helps us give voice to hitherto ignored, unnoticed voices in Tradition. Likewise, our hermeneutical approach inspired by Freud’s structural model of the psyche (Id, Ego, and Superego) conceives of narratives within Tradition as vying to achieve healthy or pathological (“neurotic”) consensus in the conscious realm of the Ego. In adjudicating between latent discourses corresponding to the Id, and prevailing discourses corresponding to the Superego, we suggest the criteria of “pain and inhibition” suffered by the “Ego” of the polity. Hence, the two modes of depth hermeneutics (Straussian and psychoanalytic) we try to sketch out in Chapter Five we present essentially as forms of immanent critique, appropriate to the shared norms of deliberative democracy.56

2. Political Narcissism and Democratic Deliberation

Introduction

Nothing could be more obvious than that grandiosity is pervasive throughout politics, almost to the extant of being constitutive. And for some, such as those agonists who emphasize the “centrality of the us/them distinction in the constitution of collective political identities,” grandiosity is constitutive. But for those whose aim is dialogue and deliberation, grandiosity poses something of a problem, for it precludes that “mutual respect” and openness to the views of the other which is the sine qua non of deliberation. One might expect the higher forms of civic discourse, such as those in which Habermas has such hopes, to be models of dialogue, free of debate. Yet grandiosity is there too, and in force. As Young observes, too often “[d]eliberation is competition,” involving actors whose aim it is to “win the argument, not to achieve mutual understanding.”

I saw this firsthand when, for a time (if I might be permitted a personal anecdote), I had a side job ghost-writing opinion pieces for scholars and would-be pundits who had difficulty finding their own voice. The op-ed pages of major newspapers are, in my experience, largely ghost-written—a fact that shocks us less when the authors are politicians who already employ speechwriters, but more so when the would-be opinion leaders hold themselves out as policy experts and public intellectuals. One of them—

we’ll call her Professor X—was an expert in health policy at a prominent thinktank and commissioned a series of op-eds attacking Massachusetts healthcare legislation, as a way of introducing her broader attack on Obamacare (then hotly contested and not yet passed into law). Of course I had different ideas about policy, but with a determined neutrality, I took on her project.

I thought her arguments would be more plausible and likelier to convert the unpersuaded if we used a moderate rhetoric; thus, in the first draft I acknowledged several strong points made by proponents of reform. To my mind, this was obviously the best approach, for though a mud-slinging piece would undoubtedly capture the attention of true believers, a more reasonable tone might win support from those on the fence. The social critic, at least the successful social critic, I imagined, is a “connected critic,” “one of us,” and “his appeal is to local or localized principles,”⁴ those shared by all, even and especially one’s opponents.

There was theoretical precedent for this: arguments in the public forum are strongest, it has been argued, when stated in reasoned tones and imbued with moderation; publicity, according to Elster, induces the “civilizing force of hypocrisy” and forces one to replace “the language of interest by the language of reason.”⁵ Dryzek, too, thinks that “there are certain kinds of positions that cannot withstand deliberative scrutiny,” and that

“talking in public interest terms will lead individuals to think in public interest terms.” 6

Too shrill a tone, I felt, and the piece would not withstand scrutiny.

“Stay on the attack,” was the reaction to my draft. “Professor X wants you to remove any acknowledgement of positives within the law and to make no suggestions for improvement.” Chastened, I deleted the offending passages, and handed in a tired polemic. And from what I could tell, the piece that made it into print changed no minds, and stirred only those who already regarded the health law in eschatological terms. It was pure eristic, willfully blind to the strengths in opposing arguments.

It is hard enough, we know, to bring parties with political differences into anything like civic discourse at all, particularly where other means exist for settling them. As one theorist has noted, “[p]sychological barriers to deliberation are especially powerful in conflicted societies” and “if parties do not trust and respect each other, if they lack motivation, if they do not perceive a common ground…then deliberation may fail even in the most ideal institutional settings.” 7 How much more daunting a task to convince political opponents to “accept [the other’s] point of view as valid and transpose[] [themselves] into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says” 8—that is to say, to accept the other as presenting a view that is not the result of idiosyncratic self-interest but being made in terms of the

public interest. Deliberation is not about sizing up the other, at least not with a view toward winning the argument. Proponents of deliberation acknowledge that political actors often approach dialogue strategically. They tolerate the process insofar as they can use it to redirect political winds their way; they seem, as in our everyday experience, not to enter into conversation but to wait for the other to stop talking so they themselves may have their say. For such people, “[w]e exist merely so that he has someone to listen to his views and to whom he can prove himself right about something. The others are objects rather than partners.”9 Respect for the other’s point of view, that starting point for understanding, seems rare enough in our daily lives that, to expect it in politics, where conflicting interests and public goods are at stake, seems almost excessively demanding.

Yet most extant accounts of democratic deliberation do demand it. Gutmann and Thompson posit that all “moral accommodation” is premised “on a value that lies at the core of reciprocity and deliberation in a democracy,” namely “mutual respect,” which “demands more than toleration” and “requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees.”10 Rawls, too, unwilling to resort to human folly as an explanation for actual deliberative failures,11 prefers to presume that deliberative participants are “reasonable persons” and, as such,

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11 See, e.g., John Rawls, “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” in David Copp et al. ed., *The Idea of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 247-249. “[P]erhaps people are often irrational and not very bright, and this mixed with logical errors leads to conflicting opinions. But such explanations are too easy, and not the kind we want. We want to know how reasonable disagreement is possible, for we always work at first within ideal theory.” Id. at p. 247.
“fully cooperating members of society.”  

All deliberative theorists maintain that participants must understand one another in order to deliberate, but much of what passes for deliberation is more appropriate to an adversarial forum, like litigation or debate. There, masking the weakness of one’s own case, and ignoring or distracting from the strengths of opposing arguments, is the order of the day, to say nothing of attacks ad hominem.

Perhaps, it may be said, we are making too great a leap to infer an absence of mutual respect from the one-sidedness of a polemic. And shouldn’t we say that a polemic, even a poor one, is not a failure and but a successful event in political discourse? It is a contribution, after all, monological though it may be. While apparently nowhere explicitly addressed by a literature that valorizes debate and carries a romantic notion of the public square, it seems obvious that polemics as such cannot be considered deliberative acts, because they lack the reciprocity of genuine deliberation. The closest analogue is perhaps Habermas’s notion of strategic versus communicative action; whereas communicative action aims at understanding, strategic action aims at the “success” of the actor. A polemic that evades the strengths of an opposing view, rather than an argument which confronts them substantively, is strategic by definition. Gutmann and Thompson imply the same thing when they indicate that “political debate”

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12 Id. at p. 247 and p. 264, n. 6, defining “reasonable persons” as “persons who have realized their two moral powers to a degree sufficient to be free and equal citizens in a democratic regime, and who have an enduring desire to be fully cooperating members of society over a complete life,” specifying those powers as “a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good.”

can (must) “mov[e]…in the direction of deliberative democracy.”

Debate, strictly speaking—eristic—is not dialogue.

Deliberative theorists do not supply an adequate account of how mutual respect or fully cooperating reasonableness can come about, however. In part this is because many prefer to direct their attention to mature deliberative democracies—Rawls, who wants to work within “ideal theory” is an exception—and not altogether wrongly, since there are a number of functioning democracies whose deliberative processes are “up and running.” Actual deliberation, however imperfect, presents its own issues and deserves its share of theorizing as well. But even in the United States, for example, civility and mutual respect are shall we say not what distinguish our political discourse, and these seem increasingly difficult to achieve as the views of elected officials become more polarized. Even those who think that civility is pretty well entrenched in our democratic practice would have to show that the genuine openness and reciprocity appropriate to deliberation are what prevail, rather than the faint likenesses appropriate to negotiation and bargaining. And so long as mutual respect is absent, so long as empathy and understanding are elusive, the aggregative model of democracy—and the majoritarianism it fosters—will predominate. Bargaining and polemics will pass for deliberation.

An interesting theoretical question arises, whether the understanding and mutual respect posited by theorists as the sine qua non of democratic deliberation are actually

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14 Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, p. 32.
necessary, or whether the mere appearance of respect, the hypocrisy induced by framing deliberation in terms of the public interest, would be enough to get the same results. This chapter proceeds along the assumption that genuine understanding and genuine respect, leading to genuine deliberation, will produce the results (legitimacy, enhanced reflectiveness) theorists seek. It recognizes that understanding, without respect—what Kohut calls “fiendish empathy”\textsuperscript{16}—may prevail in certain “strategic settings.” But it contends also that an absence of respect can lead to a lack of understanding, a refusal to understand, and this can only undermine genuine deliberation. A thorough understanding of one’s enemy, and nothing more, may be needed for such adversarial endeavors as war and litigation, but something more is needed for the cooperative enterprise of deliberation.

What follows from a lack of respect can be seen with great clarity in an exchange from the East German worker’s revolt of 1953. Following the uprising, a prominent socialist intellectual and the regime’s leading court poet, Kurt Bartel, published an attack on the rioters in the party daily. The poem, “How Ashamed I Am,” charged that it was the German people who in fact had lost the confidence of the government. “For you and for the peace of the world, the Soviet army and the comrades of the People’s Police kept watch,” it reminded them, “are you not ashamed, as I am?” The poem admonished the workers that “you will have to lay a great deal of brick and very well, and will in the

future have to act very smartly, before you will be forgotten this disgrace.”17 Privately, another poet circulated verse responding to the denunciation. Since the people “had forfeited the confidence of the government,” Brecht asked, “would it not be easier...for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?”18

The conclusion Brecht traces, at once sensible and outrageous, is revealing on several levels. Its departure from the language of Marxism is curious, of course. One could have expected the revolt to be blamed on counterrevolutionary elements, certainly, but for that hallowed class, the workers—“masons, housepainters, [and] carpenters”—to be singled out for admonishment, indeed for insult, is a far cry from Stalinist orthodoxy. The attack departs, moreover, from the flattering rhetoric many leaders use to address their publics. For the regime to endorse so punishing a tone presents an anomaly for theorists assuming that continuation in power is the primary motive of political actors19; a more typical approach would have the government framing even a truly popular uprising as the work of miscreants, the mischief of others and not of the people, not of “us.”

That East Germany was not a hospitable place for deliberation is, for our present purpose, beside the point. What should strike us is what the exchange reveals about the grandiose self-understanding of the regime. As Brecht’s reply indicates, the East German “regime...which based its legitimacy in substantial degree on the notion that it was a

17 Steve Crawshaw, Easier Fatherland: Germany and the Twenty-First Century (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 61
18 John C. Torpey, Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent: The East German Opposition and Its Legacy (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), p. 30 (quoting Brecht’s The Solution, a response to the poem of Kurt Bartel) (emphasis added).
government ‘of, by, and for’ the workers” was in effect asserting its own blamelessness and perfection even in the face of manifest discontent from the class in whose name it claimed to govern. Not the regime, that beacon of socialist progress, but the workers, with their ingratitude and preposterous demands (“More bread and meat!”20) were to blame. This high mark of East German grandiosity precluded, so long as it was sustained, any attempt at reconciliation.21

Popular grievances were perceived to be illegitimate, and the workers themselves suffered a diminution in standing. The people, in Brecht’s ironical formulation, had lost the confidence of the government. Not respect from a non-compliant other, but subjugation and destruction, Brecht suggested, is the consequence of grandiosity. At best the other is devalued or ignored.

Now one could say that we should not be surprised to find in those views an expression of political grandiosity, for it is perhaps safe to say that in politics, the conviction of “specialness” is a commonplace. But we notice nonetheless that, again, the grandiosity of this response was such as to preclude all attempt at dialogue or deliberation. Nevermind that East Germany was, in other respects, no model of

20 Torpey, *Intellectuals*, p. 26. “The list of demands expanded to include the release of political prisoners, Ulbricht’s resignation, and free elections leading to the reunification of Germany.”
21 No doubt we should not hasten to identify the views of a one member of the socialist intelligentsia with those of the entire East German regime, and in fact a few days after Bartel’s attack was published, Ulbricht’s faction would backtrack and persuade the Central Committee to offer an official attribution of “the rising to the work of ‘fascist agents.”” Torpey, *Intellectuals*, p. 31. Of course in so doing, the purpose was not to legitimize the grievances of the workers but to delegitimize them by transforming them into the baleful effort of some insidious outsider; here, too, there is the literally self-centered conviction that whatever does not come from “us” must be malign, the work of some distant force.
deliberative democracy; the case illustrates the broader political implications of grandiosity.

The exchange reminds us of the rhetoric used in conflict-ridden swaths of the world where deliberation between rival factions is unthinkable. As Dryzek has noted, “[t]he very worst repression of competing identities has often come from actors’ struggling to secure their hold over the state, and the state’s hold over society.” And here too, the GDR (like other socialist regimes) was no different; it participated in a more or less thorough adoption of the Stalinist party line regarding the baleful influence of capitalism and the West.

But in truth it has analogues even in relatively stable pluralist societies. In the American context, various groups associated with the “Black Power” movement split off from the larger African-American aspiration for inclusion in political life, advocating programs for black separatism and black supremacy. Similarly, certain radical feminists have questioned whether women need men any longer, and whether the antidote for “hegemonic masculinity” is the rejection of all things male or indeed the elevation of the feminine. As well, there have been reactionary conservative movements marked by grandiosity: the Tea Party, for example, to which a “narcissistic insecurity” has been attributed.

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23 Torpey does observe that repression in the GDR took a somewhat more benign form than in, say, the Czech Republic.
It is a sobering thing to compare these marks with the rhetoric employed by the Hutu of Rwanda. Long under the boot of the colonial supported Tutsi minority, they propounded a notion of “Hutu Power,” according to which “every Hutu should know that our Hutu daughters are more suitable and conscientious in their role as woman, wife, and mother of the family” than Tutsi women. Unlike the Hutu, “every Tutsi is dishonest in business,” moreover. Only the Hutu were morally (and racially) pure.25 Their rhetoric is traceable to the deaths of perhaps 1 million Tutsi.

Frequently, we notice, this grandiosity is a feature of formerly suppressed groups. As Dryzek suggested, some of the worst “repression of competing identities” come from those whose own identity is in some way insecure; the grandiosity may well be compensatory. Many will remember Justice Sotomayor’s controversial “hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would, more often than not, reach a better conclusion than a white male.”26 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sotomayor was also “always struggling with the fear that her Puerto Rican identity and experience merited less respect in the world of the white male judiciary,” so much so that she admitted “[e]ach day on the bench I learn something new about the judicial process and about being a professional Latina woman in a world that sometimes looks at me with suspicion.”27

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27 Id.
Spragens has perceptively pointed out that “preoccupation with group identity” can foster a sort of “narcissistic particularism.”28 Indeed, a certain kind of group identity leads to impulses that can preclude deliberation altogether. It can harden political groups and deafen them to other voices. Dryzek classes the “toughest kinds of political issues” as the “mutually contradictory assertions of identity that define a divided society,” and finds “[t]he basic problem in all these cases [to be] that one identity can only be validated or, worse, constituted by suppression of another.”29

This sort of identity I call political narcissism, and its defining element grandiosity.30 Such an identity, this chapter argues, prevents many political actors—interest groups, parties, even states—from engaging in deliberation; their grandiosity precludes the combination of understanding and reciprocal respect that opens the way to genuine dialogue.

It is well known that pathological levels of narcissism are correlated with severe deficits in the ability to view matters from the perspective of the other, so much so that lack of empathy is almost diagnostic in this regard.31 “Collective narcissism” has begun to be recognized as a phenomenon, extending a trait once associated with the pathological

individual, and while its (negative) social consequences have begun to be examined, political narcissism has not yet been considered, in any sustained way, as it pertains to deliberation. Christopher Lasch did produce a fascinating work of social criticism in *The Culture of Narcissism*, but he sees in the “therapeutic sensibility” a perpetuation of self-absorption he finds in American culture, rather than the way out as we contend. That is probably due in part to the short shrift he gives to Kohut’s writing on narcissism in favor, curiously, of the work of Kernberg and Klein. The Kernberg-Kohut debate on the subject of narcissism would take us too far afield, but it suffices to say that Kernberg sees narcissism as a much more insidious phenomenon than the more tolerant Kohut, whose work is in any event more widely associated with narcissism in the literature than Kernberg’s. Moreover, as we shall see, Kohut is fully aware that the psychotherapy would perpetuate narcissistic behavior if all it did were to shower the narcissistic patient in mirroring approval. However, the therapeutic task as Kohut understands it is to assist the patient in building internal psychic structure so that he need not depend on or seek out mirroring approval from others. Lasch misses these aspects of Kohut, and is as a result unfairly dismissive of the therapeutic endeavor.

One scholar writing on *phronesis* has gestured at the problems narcissism might create for deliberation, suggesting that “*phronesis*...at a deeper level...rests on the ability

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of the actor to invest both object oriented and narcissistic libido without letting either achieve a total predominance.”36 Deferring until later an explanation of a statement encumbered by psychoanalytic jargon, at a minimum it means that the proper exercise of phronesis in deliberation requires that “the actor must at least possess: the ability to view the matter from the point of view of the concrete other; when dealing with abstract objects and identities, this ability amounts to the capacity to recognize the inner logic of the object,”37 i.e., one’s fellow participants in deliberation.

I construe the problem of political narcissism as a pathology of political judgment, one that derives from the self-understanding of political actors. A grandiose self-image, which protects an unstable and often wounded identity, renders political actors unable to approach the perspective of the other and hence incapable of deliberation, impoverishing their capacities for judgment. Accordingly, I draw on psychoanalysis, in particular from Heinz Kohut’s so-called “self psychology,” in an effort to shed light on the roots of political grandiosity and to suggest therapeutic directions that might enable deliberation. I do so, I think, not ill-advisedly, since “the grandiose self” at the individual level “has such analogues in adult experience as, e.g., national and racial pride and prejudice (everything good is ‘inside,’ everything bad and evil is assigned to the ‘outsider’)”38 and such analogues at the political level as we have already identified.

37 Id., p. 262.  
Of course, many agonists, resigned as they are to a war of all against all in politics, will regard a therapeutic approach to grandiosity as an exercise in futility. Inasmuch as this chapter conceives of grandiosity as an impediment to dialogue and thus to a vision democracy wherein deliberation is at the heart, the chapter generally takes the side of deliberative democrats rather than agonists, it is true. In this sense, it agrees with Hobbes’ critique of vainglory, but disagrees that this passion—or rather the sense of self that makes it particularly dangerous—cannot be disciplined or changed. Whereas, for Hobbes, reaching a “measured self-estimate” was neither a likely nor an especially desirable goal for citizens/subjects, the contention of this chapter is that the self-understanding of societies, ethnicities, and other political actors, including even the state, need not be narcissistic and is indeed subject to change from without.

Yet agonists and difference democrats alike should take heart that the approach to the problem posed here does not move us back to the universalizing, i.e., homogenizing template for deliberation that “neutralize[s] differences in participant standpoint.” Addressing grandiosity, deflating an overly inflated sense of self which is at the root of a good deal of deliberative intransigence could be understood as an attack on the identity of political groups, and indeed there is something to this criticism. But the antidotes to

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39 Cf. Julie E. Cooper, “Vainglory, Modesty, and Political Agency in the Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (2010), pp. 241-269, at p. 242 (“Scholars who accord vainglory pride of place generally assume that *Leviathan* offers a definitive ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of pride. On this view, Hobbes arranges society so as to reduce detrimental consequences of the passions, but he concedes that destructive passions can neither be corrected nor disciplined—and, more importantly, they need not be disciplined. The sovereign must marshal sufficient power to contain unruly passions, but he or she (or they) need not encourage subjects to cultivate a measured self-estimate.”)

40 Id.

grandiosity proposed here do not lead to homogenous discourse or obscure the concrete other. Indeed, as I will show in the section on Kohut, it is grandiosity that homogenizes, grandiosity that “neutralize[s] differences” in the other. Empathy *attends* to difference, and upon encountering what is alien, is called to interpret the other in an effort to understand. Although Young worries that those who purport to place themselves in the shoes of the other merely “project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves”\(^{42}\) in a way that “displaces and silences the other;”\(^{43}\) we believe that a genuinely empathic approach is capable of more. We need not resign ourselves that, in order to proceed with “moral humility,” we must “start[] with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person’s perspective.”\(^{44}\

Even if there are limits beyond which the other’s perspective cannot be grasped, it is also true that our own introspective capacities are limited.\(^{45}\) We should be open to the possibility that the other may understand us in a way that we cannot, or do not easily, understand ourselves.

Little work actually addressing the issue of political grandiosity has been done, however. Narcissistic resonances have been found in a study of Hobbes,\(^ {46}\) and the

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\(^{43}\) Id., p. 346.

\(^{44}\) Id., p. 350.


narcissistic nature of kingly legitimacy has been pointed to,\textsuperscript{47} as has the grandiose relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers.\textsuperscript{48} Yet psychoanalytic work has not been drawn upon to address narcissism as a truly political phenomenon and in particular as an impediment to deliberation.

Of course, political theory is no stranger to psychoanalysis. For example, one political theorist, drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, rejects the boundary between the two disciplines as “illegitimate.”\textsuperscript{49} McIvor suggested that the task of mourning, as described by Klein, might be emulated at the political level to resolve past grievances, e.g., racial trauma. And indeed, McIvor tips a hat in passing to the viability of Kohut’s work for his own proposed endeavor.\textsuperscript{50}

Unfortunately any such importation of psychoanalytic perspective faces serious theoretical problems, which even the friendly spirit of interdisciplinarity is not alone sufficient to overcome. For example, in McIvor the issue boils down to whether, in the case of mourning, the process by which this is done socially or collectively, i.e., politically, is sufficiently analogous to the process described by Klein at the individual’s psychological level. And for us, the issue is whether our investigation into the realm of political narcissism differs fundamentally from the individual phenomena described by


\textsuperscript{50}Id., pp. 279-280.
Kohut. It is the contention of this chapter that there is enough analogousness to make our inquiry a fruitful one, but it does not ignore the need to build this bridge.

Accordingly, this chapter first reviews the literature on deliberative democracy for the importance of understanding and respect as necessary conditions for deliberation actually to transpire. It then confronts the question whether psychoanalysis can be brought to bear on political phenomena; in doing so, it attempts to show that political groups can be “personified,” analogously to the individual of psychoanalytic theory. Finally, it embarks upon an extended consideration of Kohut’s modification of classical psychoanalytic theory, known as “self psychology,” and attempts to glean curative insights for use in addressing political narcissism. It suggests that political groups with narcissistic identities must be treated with unrelenting empathy and their views subjected to respectful but unceasing interpretation in order to build sufficient psychic structure as would transform their narcissism and enable them to become full-fledged participants in deliberation.

**Deliberative Democracy and Failures of Justificatory Discourse**

Recall the advocate at the beginning of this dissertation, who was not shy in rejecting the reasons given by the court as failing to convince. There, it was only the force and rule of law that compelled his acceptance. Deliberation lacks these compulsive attributes; only the force of the better argument must prevail.

Let us postulate this much: political narcissists, from their own perspective, are like our advocate. Reasons other than their own sound, to them, ridiculous, unworthy of
real reflection, even offensive. And suppose we stipulate the detail that our rather charming Alabama lawyer is in fact an advocate for a narcissistic political group, perhaps a white supremacist association challenging the constitutionality of affirmative action. What would we make of his rejection of the judge’s reasons in such circumstances?

Now in the literature on democratic deliberation, this issue is almost always raised and dealt with as one of irreconcilable values. For example Dryzek, points out that a “multinational society is not just a policy opposed by militant Serb nationalists, it is a perceived attack on their core political being.”51 Spragens notes that “[f]or Muslims to accept the teaching that eating pork is ‘just as good as’ any other dietary practice is for Muslims de facto to renounce their faith and to declare themselves benighted.”52 Rawls, working “within ideal theory,” generously establishes a presumption against the possibility that “people are often irrational and not very bright” and proceeds on the view that disagreement, when it happens, is “reasonable.”53

Perhaps this is true of some ultimate values. But it is also true, far more often than the literature rather generously allows, that some values have been adopted, or been wrongly construed to be irreconcilable, as a result of political narcissism. And it is just here where deliberative theorists begin to equivocate. It is said that deliberation is a process of reason-giving, and reasons must convince if legitimacy is to be won, but theorists then face the difficult reality that deliberation often fails to produce agreement when participants are intransigent or unempathetic, or when deliberation fails to occur at all

52 Spragens, Civic Liberalism, p. 92.
53 Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 55.
when one party behaves narcissistically. Even when attempts at justification fail to convince, “even in the face of what we call deliberative disagreement,”

54 democratic theorists are sanguine about the role of deliberation in justifying political action. Thus theorists find citizens “call[ed] [up]on to continue to seek fair terms of cooperation among equals,”

55 as if this were not precisely what the deliberative process had aspired, and failed, to achieve. In effect, they call upon citizens to keep trying.

Of course, the exhortation to keep trying is well-meant. Fostering “a deliberative culture…not only helps citizens develop the virtues of civic integrity and magnanimity but also enables those who already have those virtues to act in accordance with them.”

56 But when it comes to improving deliberation in a substantive way, among democratic theorists there has been a great reluctance to say too much about what is involved in deliberation as such, about what counts as better or worse forms of justification, for it is feared that to do so would influence the outcome of what must be a free and fluid process.

57 Walhof, observing that “deliberative theorists have increasingly paid attention to the conditions that make democratic deliberation possible,” complains that “in so doing, however, they have largely neglected what it is that deliberation actually does.”

58 Accordingly, most of the ink been spilled in devising the most promising conditions

54 Gutmann & Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, p.53.
55 Id.
56 Id., p. 360.
57 James Bohman, Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), p. 73 (“What role does reason pay in such deliberations, if standards of rationality are themselves subject to deeply conflicting interpretations? What sort of ‘public bases of justification’ is adequate to such pluralism?”).
within which deliberation may transpire. And the generally procedural character of these contributions has arisen, it seems, from the fact that forms of practical rationality are in dispute.59 Little can be said to guide the substantive conduct of deliberation when there is already widespread disagreement about the nature of practical reasoning. Hence, for Rawls, “in making…justifications” through that deliberative process par excellence, public reason, we may employ only the “forms of reasoning found in common sense.”60

Yet the alternative of the rhetorical turn still has not become widely accepted among theorists, perhaps realizing that a descent into demagogy is all-too-likely. For the devotees of rhetoric, insisting on “the force of the better argument”61 as decisive is deemed unduly restrictive. Here, they are in agreement with feminist critiques that find “exclusionary implications” in the privileging of rational discourse.62

In contrast to the hands-off approach, we have seen efforts from so-called “constitutionalists” or proponents of “limited democracy”63 to give to deliberation something fairer than the law of the jungle. They strive to supply certain substantive minimums thought necessary to ensure the functioning of the democratic process and the basic liberties of participants. Habermas, for one, whose work is synonymous with

59 See id; see also Charles Larmore, Patterns of Moral Complexity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 36 (“when individuals’ conceptions of the good life conflict, they often will also have somewhat different notions of the ideal conditions under which they believe they could justify their conception to others.”); Alasdair Macintyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
optimism in the deliberative democratic project, has become increasingly dispirited about the possibility of deliberation being more than a matter of aspiration. Of course, to observe this is only to identify a classic liberal problem: that we continue to wrestle with how best to attain consensus under conditions of pluralism, even as societies are increasingly heterogeneous.

Do we suppose that our citizens, left to themselves, will follow the law of nature and thrive thereby? Certainly we notice that the rule among their natural analogues is survival-of-the-fittest, and hence one may expect that, in deliberation too, minority views will not long survive. Though Rawls characterizes public reason as an “orderly contest,” Young foresees that the emphasis on rational discourse will act as a “powerful silencer[],” resulting in minorities “feel[ing] put down or frustrated, either losing confidence in themselves or becoming angry.” Similarly, Fraser thinks that deliberation has tended to force female participants into a “private” sphere. And when thus silenced or excluded, what is to prevent citizens from withdrawing unto themselves (to say nothing of the hostility they might develop), just as species split off from one another after living in long isolation? As Allen points out, when distrust prevails, minorities may “leave the polity…rebel against” it, perhaps even “be expelled or eradicated.”

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66 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990), pp. 56-80.
These wounding exclusions can only injure the self-image of minorities and is likely to foster grandiosity and narcissism among them in reaction, further worsening the prospects for deliberation. Some way must be found to accommodate minorities in deliberation, and yet there certainly seems little to guarantee democracy as the gentle refuge of deliberating citizens and to prevent it from descending into that law of the jungle, majoritarianism. May we say that the climate for deliberation is favorable when the reasons given by the majority fail to convince? May we say so when, still worse, the reasons given are not even accepted as legitimate by minorities?

If reasons are being rejected because they are perceived as so outlandish as the reason rejected by the advocate above, it is just as likely that narcissism (on the part of the reason-giver or his interlocutor) is at play, as it is that we are in fact encountering a conflict of irreconcilable values in Weber’s very exalted sense. How much more common, after all, are the human tendencies to refuse to listen or to dismiss out of hand?

Now, of course we recognize a practical problem here, which is that action demands decision and judgments must be made. But we must not yield to the temptation to swat away the difficulties, for doing so does not advance us any farther toward deliberative agreement, or consensus, which is taken to be the basis of legitimacy. Classically, it was the aggregative model of democracy that recommended itself, owing to the always-pressing nature of politics. Crucially, the conception of democracy as essentially analogous to the market, in its competition for votes, was attacked on the

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68 Ruth W. Grant, “Political Theory, Political Science, and Politics,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Aug., 2002), p. 583 (“Judgment is inescapable, yet we act as if it is not even possible.”); Dahl (1989) (“all the alternatives to majority rule are also seriously flawed.”).
grounds that “the preferences people choose to express [in voting] may not be a good guide to what they really prefer” and “what they really prefer may in any case be a fragile foundation for social choice.” Deliberative democrats hoped to win greater consensus than was possible in simple vote aggregation by “a transformation of preferences through public and rational discussion.” Much the same impulse underlay Rawls’ notion of “public reason,” which “rejects common views of voting as a private and even personal matter.”

One could begin with the sour observation that the quest for consensus within democracy is self-defeating, for it is essential to democracy that it not be guided by “comprehensive doctrines,” and yet the exercise of public reason aspires toward the broadest agreement. Yet if reason had as much persuasive force as proponents of deliberation hope that it does, the need to limit political discourse in the manner of Rawls’ public reason would be moot – for, those irrational “comprehensive doctrines” which pollute rational discourse would long ago have faded away and we would now be governed by the “comprehensive doctrine” of philosophy, grounded in reason. Pluralism, at least in its political manifestation, would not be a phenomenon we would have to contend with.

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69 Jon Elster, “The Market and the Forum,” in James Bohman and William Rehg (eds.), Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 6. Elster was certainly mobilized by the notion that “the goal of politics should be rational agreement rather than compromise,” and that “the decisive political act is that of engaging in public debate with a view to the emergence of a consensus,” p. 3. But he also does not aim for perfect consensus, having “more confidence in the outcome of a democratic decision if there was a minority that voted against it, than if it was unanimous.” Id., pp. 3 & 16.

70 Id., p. 11.

71 Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 98.

72 Id., p. 243 (“politics in a democratic society can never be guided by what we see as the whole truth”).
Though democratic theorists generally aim for consensus, most acknowledge that disagreement is a fact of life in democracy. Even Rawls rather wanly admits that “in the long run a strong majority of the electorate can eventually make the constitution conform to its political will,” asserting that “this is simply a fact about political power as such” and “there is no way around this fact.”73 It is merely hoped that “an orderly contest”74 of views, conducted through public reason, will prevent the degeneration of disagreement into the rule of the strong over the weak. But as is well-known, Rawls is not even sure that public reason alone can settle the “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice,” let alone the “political questions” we face from day-to-day. Gutmann and Thompson frequently admit that though “citizens strive for a consensus…they usually continue to disagree, often intensely, on many politically relevant matters,” and conclude that “a deliberative consensus can never be complete, and perhaps never completely justified.”75

Young, for her part, consciously eschews consensus from the outset. She views “difference” as a “resource” for deliberation,76 dissenting from the idea that citizens need relinquish their group-identities in order to engage in genuine public discourse along the lines Rawls proposes. This might seem an embrace of inevitable disagreement, but Young claims she is not advocating an unbridled particularism. Rather, she thinks that

73 Id., p. 233.
74 Id., p. 227.
75 Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, p. 42.
“draw[ing] on” the “situated knowledge” of various social groups will actually serve “as a resource for enlarging the understanding of everyone and moving them beyond their own parochial interests.”\(^{77}\) But since she denies that any group can sufficiently grasp the other’s perspective, it is difficult to see how the public will not emerge more fragmented, how groups will not become more narcissistic (lip-service toward their respective travails notwithstanding). In her stubborn defense of the “politics of difference,” Young joins those who have dissented from the camp of deliberative democracy altogether, such as Connolly and Mouffe.\(^{78}\) These theorists see disagreement as a fact of life, one either to be celebrated or accommodated to, within a model of so-called agonistic democracy.

Dryzek does just the opposite and, even if he does not set very stringent ground rules like Gutmann & Thompson, he believes that the activity of deliberation will itself serve to foster public-mindedness and hence facilitate agreement.\(^{79}\) There is something to this, as our look at Kohut will suggest, but it is not in the manner Dryzek suggests. He places no limitations on argumentation as do Rawls or Gutmann & Thompson, but expects that from this free-for-all a kind of public-spiritedness will emerge: Dryzek claims that the most successful arguments tend to be those which appear the least partisan, though he freely acknowledges that this is often no more than a rhetorical screen for particularized interest. Nevertheless, even this rhetorical surface may foster genuine public-mindedness, and hence his faith in the “civilizing force of hypocrisy.” Dryzek,

\(^{77}\) Id., p. 399


however, does not have an answer to objections that might be posed by theorists like Mouffe, who believe in the “ineradicable character” of “power and antagonism” in politics.\textsuperscript{80} Why would the “civilizing force of hypocrisy” be not overtaken by the honest force of majoritarianism? Why would it not devolve into an us-and-them form of politics, for which we have ample historical evidence? Allen asks these very questions, wondering how best to build trust between participants in the deliberative process.\textsuperscript{81}

Ackerman suggests that the problem of disagreement can be minimized by cabining genuine deliberation to great moments of constitutional uncertainty,\textsuperscript{82} but that proposal is unavailing, as moments calling for deliberation are far more frequent than he allows. This is obvious enough for issues of great moment, like questions of war and peace, but even fiscal considerations that seem highly technical and limited to a sphere for technocrats involve normative questions. Even “political questions” seemingly mundane in the extreme, Rawls admits, “sometimes…do involve fundamental matters,” though he finds it difficult to explain when and “why the restrictions imposed by public reason may not apply to them; or if they do, not in the same way, or so strictly.”\textsuperscript{83}

As we saw in the Introduction, some deliberative theorists have begun to retreat from the aim of consensus altogether. The failure of reason-giving to result in consensus has driven deliberative expectations frightfully low, but we should aspire to more. Conflicts among ultimate values there may be, but political narcissism prevents many

\textsuperscript{80} Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” at p. 752.
\textsuperscript{81} Danielle S. Allen, \textit{Talking to Strangers}
\textsuperscript{83} Rawls, \textit{Political Liberalism}, p. 215.
good reasons from being accepted as such. We hope to address problems such as these rather than declaring the deliberative ideal a futile one.

Can Psychoanalysis Be Brought to Bear on Politics?

If we seek to learn anything useful for politics from psychoanalysis, we have to deal with a theoretical problem not generally faced by those wishing to draw from that discipline. Namely: First, whether group-level political actors—states, parties, institutions—may be said to have psychological states at all, or whether, in personifying a group, we do not more than create a useful fiction to speak metaphorically about collections of individuals. As to this first point, one scholar has argued that trying to understand political collectivities in terms of the individual through, e.g., discourses of state personhood, is unnecessary and actually destructive.84 Here, however, it is crucial to my argument, given that I seek precisely to draw upon psychological theory. Second, if group-level political actors do have such psychological states, whether they are of such a character and originate sufficiently analogously to those of individuals that psychoanalytic theory may be brought to bear. Even if we can show that the psychology of groups proceeds along the same lines as the psychology of their members, does it make sense to speak in analytic terms?

McIvor calls for a “democratic superego,” but given that the superego has been thought to develop within the specific context of the family, does it make sense to graft that concept onto a democracy? According to Freud, the superego develops in response to the very specific phenomenon of the Oedipus complex: a young boy faces a father who prevents him from realizing an Oedipal wish to possess his mother; therefore the boy’s ego represses the Oedipal wish, essentially internalizing the obstacle of the father and creating, in the father’s image, a superego or ego ideal; the superego thereafter serves preceptual and prohibitive functions (it commands the ought’s and ought not’s) in tension with the “actual performances of the ego.” Freud acknowledged that the formation of the superego, which he saw as stemming from the “revolutionary event” of the ego’s repression of the Oedipal wish, was the result in part of “historical” factors, i.e., “a heritage of the cultural development necessitated by the glacial epoch.” Therefore its formation depends on maturation—and specifically, sexual maturation—within the context of a family structure which is a matter of historical contingency. We would then be forced to show that political groups come to have “ego ideals” through some analogous developmental path. Moreover, as scarcely needs saying, the particular Freudian account of superego development has been vigorously contested for its rather mythic character and especially for its implications for women (i.e., that women, because they do not undergo an Oedipal complex, will have comparatively underdeveloped superegos and hence be the moral inferiors of men).

85 McIvor, *Mourning in America*, p. 130.
87 Id., pp. 30-31.
All this is just to show that the importation of concepts with their origins in psychoanalysis is fraught with difficulties. I wish here to defend the possible use of such concepts as the Superego or mourning (in its capacity as term of art) – indeed, in the preliminary sketches with which we conclude this dissertation, we use the concept of the Superego rather freely ourselves – but nonetheless we contend that if we are to work “[a]t the level of collectivities” we must first show that this is a possibility and, thereafter, we must take care to use these terms as precisely as our analogies allow. To employ psychoanalytic concepts too loosely is to divorce them from the original meanings and limit their usefulness. If the concepts cannot be bridged or readily analogized at the group and political level, then we are in danger of obfuscating our understanding of political phenomena.

To the question at the head of this section, many political scientists familiar with the “rational actor” model according to which states are presumed unitary and monolithic would be tempted to answer: naturally. But we are deliberately side-stepping the rational actor approach, in spite of the fact that it would simplify matters for us considerably, because several of its assumptions would conflict with what we seek to demonstrate. While the rational actor model regards states as unitary, we do not assume further that political groups are rational; indeed, we think that emotion can be imputed to them. Moreover, we do not assume that they necessarily behave in ways wherein utility is actually maximized. The phenomenon of grandiosity, especially in political minorities,

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often prevents them from participating as fully in deliberative process as their interests might otherwise dictate—much the way Allen suggests that a lack of “trust” prevents some political groups (for her, racial) from fully participating in the democratic process. Inasmuch, however, as we share with the rational actor model the need to show political groups as “unitary,” we would undoubtedly be open to some of the same criticisms as the “bureaucratic politics” school has leveled against it. Be this as it may, we think we are nonetheless addressing many of those criticisms below.

Perhaps the most promising account according to which we might impute psychological states to group-level political actors is Wendt’s argument that states are “persons” and hence that we may “attribute to them properties we associate first with human beings—rationality, identities, interests, beliefs, and so on.”89 Wendt finds more novelty in the personification of the state than perhaps is merited, claiming that the “idea of corporate ‘personality’ is of medieval origin” and that “its application to states was not routine in the West.”90 (Is not the personification of the state traceable at least as far back as The Republic, with its description of regimes corresponding to different types of men?) In any event Wendt does pose the right question: why states should be regarded as “real” persons rather than “as if” they were. Certainly the common sense reaction to this question is that of course “the state” is a fiction and that any act of such a purported entity is really reducible to the actions of the individuals within it.

90 Id.
Wendt posits several criteria for state personhood, one of which provides a useful starting point for us if we wish to attribute a sort of personhood to all group-level political actors: intentionality. For our purposes, intentionality is undoubtedly the threshold condition. Without it, there is no possibility of “collective narcissism” as Zavala et al. describe it. And provisionally, we might go a step further than Wendt and posit that it is also necessary that the state (or other political group) have a collective unconscious as well. I mean this not in the somewhat mystical sense with which Jung coined the term, but simply to remind us that, insofar as the unconscious is crucial to psychoanalytic theory generally, we cannot lightly amputate that limb without fatally impairing our attempt to draw from this body of theory. And in fact, what goes by the name of the “social unconscious” has more respectability today than Jung’s term. Be this as it may, let us turn to the threshold criterion of intentionality.

It’s worth observing that despite the knee-jerk response that group “intentions” can only be conceived in the sense of being reducible to individual intentions, the preponderant view among theorists is actually that groups do indeed have intentions. Most make the so-called ‘scientific realist’ argument that, since conceiving of groups as intentional entities frequently yields valid predictions, it would be strange if it were not true. Thus Dennett says that “any object” or “system…whose behavior is well predicted”

91 Id., at p. 296. Wendt also suggests a state may be personified as a “superorganism” in the same way that an insect colony, for example, may be said to be an entity that exhibits unified intelligence of a kind; as well, he points out that a state may be personified as a “collective consciousness.” I do not pursue those analogies here. To the extent we need to show that political groups are “conscious” to be susceptible to psychoanalytic theory, that seems to me to be subsumed by intentionality.

is “in the fullest sense of the word a believer,” i.e., an entity with intentions. This much may be said in its favor, that “explanatory power is prima facie evidence that the theory is not false,” though having the highly prognostic but ultimately untrue example of the Ptolemaic system in the back of our minds should give some pause.

Now one sort of group intention is obviously present whenever mutual action is undertaken. For example, if political actors should decide to bargain or even to deliberate, we would certainly say they share “intentions.” They both intend the same sort of action, though this is by no means the kind of mutual intentionality we have been trying to get at. True, we might construe parties to a negotiation or deliberation as a kind of “group,” but that construal is only skin-deep because in fact parties to these activities are almost always deeply antagonistic – whether strategically, in the case of negotiation, or simply as the result of different starting points among those who deliberate across “deep divides.” Something else is at play in the group intentionality we would like to demonstrate.

Perhaps the best description of this missing characteristic is Wendt’s when he distinguishes “group intentions” from merely “collective intentions” as those that involve “collective agency.” These may range from so-called “plural subjects” to “corporate

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actors." The former are those groups whose members may have the same ends in view, but have a kind of dispersed decision-making process so that their intentions cannot quite be said to be “one.” Corporate actors, however, typically make decisions in top-down fashion and enjoin their members to comply; indeed, membership in a corporate body, whether a state or a corporation, is usually predicated upon that compliance and hence tends toward a unified agency. We might think of political parties as somewhat looser entities, in that members can sometimes take positions that go against the grain of the “party line.” Certainly the notion that a political party has a “big tent,” i.e., that it contains a diversity of views, is something that political actors often boast of and see as a positive attribute, though we see immediately that it dampens the agency that party may be said to have. Nevertheless, even in the case of political parties, party leadership provides a constraining and unifying influence through the penalties it can exact on party members who step out of line.

Recent work has revived arguments that whatever intentionality we might impute to these groups can be boiled down to the intentions of their members. A number of rejoinders might be made.

If we say that group intentions are ultimately no more than the intentions of its members, have we not already implied the existence of a group? Moreover, Pettit has suggested that groups can make some decisions which their members would never have reached individually; his example has three employees deliberating about whether to take

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a pay cut which would go toward improving various workplace safety measures. Obviously, as a discrete issue, none would vote for a reduction in pay, but when deliberated about differently, asking first whether there is a serious danger in the workplace, as to which the safety improvements would be an effective measure and the pay cut would be a bearable loss, the employees support the cut. Thus Pettit observes that “many social groups that have to make judgments on various issues…routinely do so by reference to considerations that are privileged within the group.”

Political groups may have longer lives than their members, and in the case of states the composition of their members may change completely after several generations; yet their intentions may remain the same. This, too, indicates that group intentionality may be a larger phenomenon than a mere aggregation of individual intentions. This is not to deny that group intentions may change over time, but we do not necessarily say that the group is “different” merely because intentions change, just as we do not say that individuals are “different people” (except very loosely) when they change their intentions.

Most political phenomena, as such, would seem to serve as proof that group intentions are real and not fictive. “War,” Wendt observes, is a “highly complex social practice[ ] that no individual can perform by herself.” And inasmuch as Arendt’s notion of power may be said to have any explanatory purchase, she points out that

“[p]ower corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert,”¹⁰² that “[p]ower is never the property of an individual.” Certainly her idiosyncratic notions of political “action” as an “activity that…corresponds to the human condition of plurality,”¹⁰³ and of the polis a the place where “men met one another as citizens [i.e., members of a group] and not as private person,”¹⁰⁴ even if these cannot be said to be the last word, nonetheless suggests politics as a particularly fecund space for group intention. If Arendt is correct that “[n]o government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed,”¹⁰⁵ does this not suggest the existence of group intentionality?

For his part, Freud essentially these questions in the affirmative, suggesting that a “mass” is merely a “number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego-ideal and who have consequently identified themselves with one another in terms of their egos.”¹⁰⁶ Hence Freud saw little difficulty in regarding group actions as the acts of a single ego, and in analyzing them as such. Sasley, in effect agreeing with Freud, finds that “the group becomes part of the individual, who then reacts not as that individual but as a member of the group, and individual members of the group converge on the same emotions, so that we can speak of a ‘single’ prototypical [group] emotion.”¹⁰⁷ Other social theorists have reached the same conclusion, finding that “to the

¹⁰² Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World) p. 44.
¹⁰⁵ Hannah Arendt, On Violence, p. 44.
extent that group membership defines them, people do not think of themselves as unique individuals, but rather as relatively interchangeable members of the group.”

So much for the issue of intentionality. To build a more secure bridge between politics and psychoanalysis, we would have to endeavor to show also that political groups may be said to have emotions, and may even be said to have a “social unconscious.”

But let us proceed and consider what sustenance we can draw from the psychoanalytic tradition.

**Political Narcissism and the “Cure” of Kohut’s Self Psychology**

Perhaps nothing can give a better sense of Kohut’s relation to psychoanalysis than a scene at the low-point of his life, in Vienna in 1938. The Nazis annex Austria that year and many Jews sought to flee the city. Kohut’s medical degree seemed in jeopardy, as Nazi decrees barred him from sitting for his exams that term. In despair, Kohut began to consider leaving Vienna as well, and it happened that the founder of psychoanalysis, too, was set to depart, his exit having been orchestrated with some secrecy. Kohut’s analyst,

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108 Id., p. 457.
109 Obviously the common sense notion is that “[b]ecause states are collective, institutional actors, one cannot claim that they feel angry” because they do not not have a coherent body capable of feeling anything,” and so the most we can say is that again, they do “they act out the ‘transitory social role’ of being angry.” Todd H. Hall, “We Will Not Swallow This Bitter Fruit: Theorizing a Diplomacy of Anger,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, pp. 521-555 (2011), at p. 532. But Sasley has drawn on a branch of social psychology known as “intergroup emotions theory” in an attempt to show that states have “emotional reactions” that “generate intergroup perceptions and intergroup behavior.” Brent E. Sasley, “Theorizing States’ Emotions,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Sep., 2011), pp. 452-476. And very recently, *International Theory* has devoted a forum with ten new articles in its November 2014 issue to the question whether “emotion” can be used at anything more than the individual level of analysis, e.g., whether states or other political groups can be said to have "emotions."

110 Weinberg, “So What is this Social Unconscious Anyway”
the well-known August Aichhorn, knew the time of departure and, though he could not be there personally—for his presence would attract unnecessary attention—suggested to Kohut that this would be his one chance to glimpse the great man, tipping him off to the place and time. On the train, already boarded, was a figure in a wheelchair whose face bore expression of calm: it was Freud. As the train began to leave, Kohut approached the window, removed his hat and waved goodbye to Freud who, noticing, tipped his own hat to Kohut.111

Kohut became an analyst so devoted to the tenets of classical analysis that he was (as he later joked) “Mr. Psychoanalysis.”112 His work nonetheless represents a profound modification of Freudian thought and even an “apostasy,”113 though one only undertaken after long clinical experience had convinced him that such a modification was warranted. And throughout his work, Kohut sought to stress his continuity with Freud, leaving it to others to make the “broad, systematic comparison that will eventually have to be done” between his thought and classical analysis.114

Kohut’s experience treating patients persuaded him that many suffered primarily in the realm of “narcissism” rather than from “conflict neuroses,” the principal psychic disturbance understood by so-called drive psychology. Originally, Freud had conceived of narcissism as corresponding to a “normal,” “autoerotic” stage of sexual development,

113 Id.
one wherein libidinal energy is directed at the self.\textsuperscript{115} Later he came to view narcissism as the cause of “megalomania,” a condition he compared to schizophrenia and that he regarded as unanalyzable.\textsuperscript{116} Much more common, in Freud’s view, were the conflict neuroses: conditions caused by a conflict between the (sexual and/or aggressive) drives and desires of the Id, and the strictures of a punishing Superego. Set in the midst of these warring factions, the Ego has either to live with the grief of a finger-wagging Superego, or must (e.g.) defensively repress the drives of the Id. A conflict ensues among the factions, a picture of things that reminds us of failed political dialogue. When the Id and the Superego fail to reach a compromise, or reach one that is maladaptive, neurosis emerges.

Kohut’s shift from this classical picture with its primacy of the conflict neuroses to the disturbances of the “self” he witnessed in patients arose not just from his impression that Freudian drive psychology simply did not adequately describe the clinical phenomena he encountered. It arose also from his conviction that “the leading psychopathology of man is indeed changing from the predominance of conflict situations, of conflict problems, to the predominance of [pathological] self-cohesion.”\textsuperscript{117} Drive conflicts, e.g., sexual conflicts, are simply less predominant in our more permissive era than during the infancy of psychoanalysis. And in dissenting as to the nature of

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\item Elsa F. Ronningstam, \emph{Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5.
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contemporary psychological illness, so Kohut also dissented about the nature of the cure. “I am fighting two orthodoxies,” he explained. “One [the Freudian] decrees that every cure rests on the analysis of the Oedipus complex, the other [the Kleinian] legislates that every cure rests on the analysis of the depressions and rages of earliest infancy.”

Patients who suffer from narcissistic disturbances tend to dwell on “archaic grandiose self configurations” or on idealized “objects,” i.e., people with whom they wish to merge. To sustain a precarious sense of self, such patients have recourse to archaic (i.e., infantile) fantasies of power and perfection, or, as was just said, they tend to attach themselves to figures whom they idealize. Implicit in their proximity to such perfect figures, of course, is their own “specialness,” etc. Taken to the extreme, both these narcissistic tendencies have their respective “psychotic counterparts” in “delusional grandiosity,” and in fantasies of an all-powerful “influencing machine.” Kohut describes these two alternatives in the words of a narcissist as (1) “I am perfect,” or (2) “You are perfect, but I am part of you.” They correspond, in Kohut’s nomenclature, to the grandiose self and to the idealized parent imago with whom merger or a relationship of twinship is sought.

We are focused on the first expression of pathological narcissism, namely the grandiose self and its political analogues. There is no doubt however that the sort of relationship described by its second expression, the idealized parent imago, is equally

118 Kohut, Cure, p. 7.
119 Kohut, Analysis, p. 4.
120 Id., p. 7.
121 Id., p. 27.
pervasive in politics and causes problems of its own. The success of many a demagogue can be credited to the tendency of citizens to idealize too readily, indeed, to their hunger to idealize and attach themselves to some perfect figure or in-group. Sycophants and court flatters, not genuinely deliberating citizens, suffer from this form of narcissistic malady. In general it probably contributes to the development and hardening of political movements on the fringes. Indeed, it would not be surprising to find a group of such true-believers led by someone who himself suffers from narcissistic illness, manifesting in the grandiose self. The relationship between a leader who desperately needs proof of his own perfection, and followers who desperately need to idealize and feel close to someone they regard as perfect, can be mutually sustaining.

Returning to the first expression of narcissism, it is well to recognize that the designation “narcissistic” should not be taken as implying self-centeredness in too strict a sense. The patient with narcissistic issues cannot be said to be “self-absorbed” in the sense that he spends every moment in self-contemplation. That sort of self-absorption, in psychoanalytic terms, is more akin to the “autoerotism” of the infant, which precedes any distinction between self and other. By contrast, the narcissistic patient is likely to maintain human relationships, but these will have a narcissistic character. In that sense, individual narcissism has a necessarily social (often political) dimension: narcissists need others to sustain their precarious sense of self. Persons with whom a basically narcissistic relationship is maintained are deemed “self-objects” (a modification

of the Freudian term “object” used to designate any human other) owing to their usefulness in sustaining the patient’s sense of self. The self-objects will either serve a mirroring function, one that sustains the grandiose self, or the narcissist will be involved in the idealization of some figure to whom he attaches himself. These functions of course correspond to the two faces of narcissism Kohut describes. Needless to say, regarding the other as a “self-object,” i.e., as existing to buttress one’s grandiose self-image, is antithetical to the mutual respect necessary to deliberation.

It should be noted that mere dependence on others for support is not itself a sign of narcissistic disturbance. Rather, Kohut presumes that we all have narcissistic needs, and indeed “[d]uring periods when a person’s self is exposed to severe stress, his ability to avail himself temporarily of archaic modes of narcissistic sustenance via archaic self-object processes of support is an asset of his personality organization and a quality that is not only compatible with, but specifically characterizes the mature self organization of some of the most successfully creative-productive individuals.” Kohut, Cure, pp. 218-219, n. 6.

This “mature self-object resonance” differs from the way a narcissistically disturbed patient will tend to make use of self-objects pervasively, which has an “oppress[ive] and enslav[ing]” quality corresponding to its infantile origins.

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Kohut, Cure, pp. 218-219, n. 6.
Id.
Kohut, Analysis, p. 33.
Two basic forms of transference manifest in the therapeutic setting, again corresponding to and depending on whether the patient’s narcissism is directed at some “narcissistic object” (idealized person) or at the narcissistic subject (grandiose self): the idealizing and mirroring transferences, respectively. Again, we are focused on the grandiose self, as its political analogue is the most detrimental to deliberative conditions.

Whereas for Freud the pathology of the typical “transference neurosis” relates to “conflicts over (incestuous) libidinal and aggressive strivings,” e.g., conflicts having to do with Oedipal trauma, for Kohut the narcissistic disturbance “concerns primarily the self and the archaic narcissistic objects.” Essentially, the problem is that the patient is unable to maintain a stable sense of self, roughly what we often call self-esteem. Such people thus tend to ricochet between feelings of grandiosity (when they are immersed in the frail, false self they have constructed) and deep shame (when they perceive their real, wounded self). Their grandiosity is on the one hand a remnant of early fantasies of omnipotence, and it serves as a defense to deep shame. An “absoluteness of persistence and of conviction of the right to success . . . betrays” an “old, limitless narcissism” and indeed we see such qualities among the most zealous and uncompromising figures in politics.

While the concept of “transference” is a rich term of art within psychoanalysis, it generally refers to the reemergence within the setting of the relationship between analyst and patient, of unconscious feelings or childhood relationship patterns. For an intelligent discussion, see “Transference” in Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 455-462. 

Id., p. 32.
Id., p. 19
Id., p. 108.
here, the remarks of Justice Sotomayor, regarding the “world that sometimes looks at me with suspicion,” again come to mind quite poignantly—as Kohut notes, “since…the persistent demand of the grandiose self forced the developing ego to respond with unusual performance.”130

In psychoanalysis with a narcissistic patient, the analyst becomes the provider of narcissistic sustenance, or “mirroring,” for the patient. It is the “therapeutic reinstatement of that normal phase of the development of the grandiose self in which the gleam in the mother’s eye”—that famous Kohutian phrase—“mirrors the child’s exhibitionistic display, and other forms of maternal participation in and response to the child’s narcissistic-exhibitionistic enjoyment confirm the child’s self-esteem.”131

Now here is an apparent paradox in the therapeutic treatment of narcissism: if the mirror transference manifests itself in the therapeutic setting and the patient begins to make use of the analyst as a self-object in order to sustain his sense of self, will this not inevitably foster a relationship of dependency? If what the child craved was an approving and empathic response to his early, still coalescing self, and the analyst now serves to provide this response, how will we ween the patient from the mirroring nutriment? In Kohut, clinical vignettes abound of patients losing cohesion when their analysts leave for vacation, or even over the weekend.

The reason this paradox does not prevail is really the essence of the cure. The original problem for narcissists, in brief, is that the child does not receive sufficient

130 Id., p. 112.
131 Id., p. 116 (emphasis added).
mirroring from the mother. The child needs these mirroring responses in order build up a cohesive (one may say confident, secure, stable) sense of self, and in order to regulate his self-esteem. The child has no internal psychological structure to perform these functions for himself and must seek them from without, chiefly from the approving responses of the mother. A total absence of such mirroring, or its traumatic withdrawal, will result in the child’s failure to develop a stable sense of self. By contrast, if the child is “optimally frustrated” in this mirroring, then his psyche will gradually take over the functions once performed by the mother. Little by little, each time the child tugs at his mother’s skirt to draw her attention to some achievement of his, each time that she fails to respond attentively and empathically to these exhibitionistic needs, the child’s psyche will (via what Kohut calls transmuting internalization) gradually take over these functions for itself. This happens only if the frustrations are optimal, i.e., gradual and minute, rather than traumatic. 132

If there is no frustration whatsoever, for example if the mother is so overly attentive as to bathe the child in mirroring approval (corresponding to what Kohut refers to as “optimal gratification”), 133 then his psyche never has the impetus or chance to take over this function; and if the frustration is too sudden or too severe, the psyche cannot cope.

The same then is true of the analytic situation: once a mirroring transference is established vis-à-vis the analyst and the analyst is being used by the patient

132 Kohut, Cure, pp. 102-103.
133 Id., p. 103.
(unconsciously) as a self-object, i.e., to support the patient’s sense of self, inevitably the analyst will fail to respond attentively and empathically. The analyst need not try to fail— even the most unrelenting empathic efforts will flag at some point. But these little failures are actually to be welcomed as optimal frustrations that permit the patient gradually, and over a long period, to take over these functions for himself.

Narcissism may be emerging as the dominant pathology of contemporary life, but for Kohut “the most important point to be stressed about narcissism” is that it is not pathological per se; rather it ranges “from the most primitive to the most mature, adaptive, and culturally valuable.”\(^\text{134}\) This differs from the account given by classical analysis according to which (primitive) narcissism should, in the mature or fully realized human being, be transformed into “object love,” i.e., an altruistic or selfless relation to the other. Thus, for a Freudian analyst, the goal is “to replace the patient’s narcissistic position with object love,”\(^\text{135}\) shedding the infantile narcissism like a layer of skin. For Kohut, narcissism and object love can coexist and each may develop into higher forms independent of the other. One need not disavow the needs of the self. The goal then is to transform the so-called “archaic” grandiosity into the more developed form of narcissism. Kohut analogized the Freudian “moralism” about narcissism as one that psychology must outgrow “in the same way we have had to outgrow our sexual hypocrisy.”\(^\text{136}\)


\(^{136}\) Id., p. 620.
That the self, rather than the drives, are regarded as primary in Kohut’s scheme has a number of consequences. For example, aggression, which had such primacy for Freud, is for Kohut “secondary,” and “arises originally as the result of the failure of the self-object environment to meet the child’s need for optimal…empathic responses…[a]ggression, furthermore, as a psychological phenomenon, is not elemental.” Kohut even posits that the classical Oedipal complex is by no means a necessary phase of psychological development, but one which is actually set in motion by narcissistic injury. That is to say, the narcissistic injury is the primary thing, and any oedipal trauma arises from it. “Could it not be,” Kohut asks, that “the dramatic, conflict-ridden Oedipus complex of classical analysis, with its perception of a child whose aspirations are crumbling under the impact of castration fear, is not a primary maturational necessity but only the frequent result of frequently occurring failures from the side of narcissistically disturbed parents?”

Merely because so many patients present with oedipal issues by no means proves that oedipal trauma is developmentally unavoidable; Kohut compares this to the frequency of dental problems and points out that their pervasiveness does not mean that they should be regarded as a part of “health.” In fact, he even contends that “the child of healthy parents enters the oedipal phase joyfully.”

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138 Id., p. 247.
This is just to point out that Kohut does not “consider narcissism to be a disease,” at least not narcissism per se. It is a trait we must live with, for “an ideal, self-sufficient, inner-directed man in terms of moral codes and superego guidance is an insufficient outlook on the problem at hand,” and that “kind of independence is not to be achieved.” Kohut is in agreement with agonists that the specter of grandiosity, among other narcissistic traits, may well be ever-present in politics as at the level of the individual psyche. But if we were to achieve a state of general psychological health and self “stability,” we would not see the pathological manifestations of narcissism that plague our discourse. We need not aspire to the total exclusion of narcissism from political life or from deliberation. The concerns of the particular self (celebrated by Young and difference democrats) are not to be excised in favor of some homogenous template for democratic deliberation. Kohut is in agreement with Young that total self-forgetting is impossible, yet at the same time concludes that empathy is not only not futile, but crucial.

Kohut does posit “two separate and largely independent developmental lines: one which leads from autoerotism via narcissism to object love; another which leads from autoerotism via narcissism to higher forms and transformations of narcissism.” Nevertheless, in his view, “[t]he issue…is not narcissism versus object love.” It is not that the extraordinary preoccupation with the self is per se unhealthy, and indeed “certain

140 Kohut, Chicago Institute Lectures, p. 40
141 id., p. 376.
142 Kohut, Analysis, p. 220.
143 Kohut, Chicago Institute Lectures, p. 41.
creative people do not develop their object-love capacities to a great degree, but their narcissistic forces lead to a flowering of creativity.” Hence, the question of health is one pertaining to value judgments—does one favor the fruits of narcissism or object love? For Kohut, “[v]alue judgments don’t belong” strictly speaking to psychoanalytic treatment and hence treatment has to proceed on the basis of a preexisting, tentative judgment about the direction the patient wishes to pursue. Now what can be done, without smuggling the analyst’s values into the process, is to treat “disturbances in the development of narcissism.” 144

Whether in fact Kohut’s treatment is agnostic as to whether it intends to steer the patient toward a greater capacity to object love or free him to develop his narcissism to even greater heights is doubtful; in Kohut’s clinical examples, most patients seem better poised in the direction of object love (though many also experience a freeing of narcissistic libido and a spontaneous flowering in their once-stunted capacities for work). There is no doubt that in the larger clinical literature on narcissism, writers do not even try to adopt this neutrality. In the treatment of narcissistic disorders, there is little discussion outside Kohut of the appropriateness of helping the patient along various developmental possibilities according to their own values or other considerations. For example, it may not make sense to steer certain individuals with substantial capacities for creative work away from the narcissistic path and toward object love; should we have encouraged da Vinci to spend more time with people, away from his studio? In politics,

144 id.
it has certainly been argued that “love of glory” is not dangerous as such, provided that it is brought into the service of the common good.145

I am mindful that the cure for pathological narcissism – namely empathy – suggested by Kohut could, if applied politically, be understood to mean no more than the public affirmation and recognition of the “specific experience, culture, and social contributions” of all minorities suggested by Young146 and other difference democrats. Spragens certainly suggests that Young’s approach is “narcissistic” because it is like the mother that never interrupts her mirroring approval—it would not help us cure political narcissism by any means.147

But in calling for empathy, we are calling for more than the “stance of wonder”148 endorsed by Young as the only position that, by refraining from understanding, does not project our own misunderstandings onto the other. “Wonder” regards the experiences of minorities as worthy of respect but untouchable. We are calling for a deeper form of understanding than the sort which Young finds so off-putting. We do so not least because, were we to call for the mere recognition of difference, as Young does, we would be doing no more than “optimally gratifying” the other’s narcissistic needs, i.e., fostering dependency and perpetuating his narcissism, rather than building psychic structure

145 On thinks of Pericles’ Funeral Oration and and Lincoln’s Lyceum Address (“Distinction will be his paramount object, and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm, yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.”) Of course, Palmer thinks that Thucydides is skeptical of Pericles’ proposed solution. See Michael Palmer, “Love of Glory and the Common Good,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Dec. 1982), pp. 825-836.
147 Spragens, Civic Liberalism, p. 89.
148 Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity,” p. 358.

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through “optimally frustrating” and “genuinely analytic”\textsuperscript{149} empathy. The approach I want to endorse therefore avoids being merely gratifying, i.e., avoids the tendency merely to wallow in the patient’s travails, or worse, to sustain her grandiose fantasies through unfettered mirroring, because it proceeds rather like the analyst who, wishing to forestall any “psychoanalytically deleterious gratification, for patients” prone to weeping as a retreat from genuine analytic work, “removed the Kleenex boxes from his office.”\textsuperscript{150}

In just this way, if the views of political narcissists are premised on their specific cultural histories, these must be pursued—empathically and unrelentingly. And it should be done in as gentle, thorough, and analytically neutral a manner as possible. For example, rather than treating the experiences of minorities as untouchable, as Young rather defensively suggests they are, efforts should be made to understand them deeply, precisely by those with contrasting backgrounds and contrasting political views, so that small, optimal frustrations may occur. Of course I don’t mean to suggest that deliberative participants should \textit{try} to fail in their attempts to understand, any more than the analyst should try to fail in his empathic understanding of his patients. The goal is genuine understanding. Yet in the context of sustained attempts to understand, such lapses—and their resolutions—may begin to be seen as the products of good faith, as fruitful and productive failures. Momentary fractures of political empathy may actually lead to stronger relationships among political actors, eventually culminating in mutual respect, if

\textsuperscript{149} Kohut, \textit{Cure}, pp. 102-103.  
\textsuperscript{150} Id., p. 107.
that empathy is seen to be genuine attempt to understand rather than the “patronizing
atitudes of pity”\textsuperscript{151} abhorred by Young.

How much more therapeutic might be the deep, sustained empathy on the part of
relatively prosperous whites toward underprivileged blacks vis-à-vis the issue of
affirmative action, than stiff, polite, “politically correct” but arms-length silence that
leaves black grievances intact and ignored? How much more therapeutic this sort of
engagement, with its inevitable well-meant failures, than one that mythologizes cultural
experiences and places them \textit{beyond} understanding—for example, in the way that some
feminists have claimed that issues of abortion are beyond debate because men simply
cannot understand the realities of female pregnancy? Could it not be that genuine
attempts to understand without condescension might soften the brittle identities that too
often defend a vulnerable core in identity politics?

Likewise many liberals and conservatives at the farther ends of the spectrum,
accustomed to being misunderstood and having adopted an increasingly stubborn
hostility toward outsiders—how might they receive genuine attempts to understand,
rather than to mock? They also, after a period of suspicion and disbelief, might come to
see that such attempts at understanding are well-meant, that a haughty pose of superiority
is unnecessary, and themselves begin to listen to those who took them seriously.

\textsuperscript{151} Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity,” p. 344.
Conclusion

To be sure, understanding is only the first step; it requires “the next step of giving of interpretations” to “move from a lower form of empathy to a higher form of empathy,” and inevitably there will be failures and interpretations that are rejected by one’s partner in deliberation. But precisely because the model of psychoanalysis makes necessary the “move from understanding to explaining,” it permits greater consciousness in the patient of his true self. That is to say, the analyst does not merely “optimally gratify” (as we and Kohut have put it) the patient’s need for mirroring attention. The analyst does not permit the patient forever to maintain a fragile (false, grandiose) self-image supported by the analyst’s mirroring approval. Through analysis, through the mode of interpretation, the analyst helps the patient to see himself as he is. And we, at the political level, suggest the same: by employing a mode of empathy analogous to the analyst’s interpreting empathy, not only do we establish an alliance with our deliberative partner similar to the “therapeutic alliance”; not only do we satisfy the need for understanding of once-marginalized others who have emerged as political narcissists; but we help lift them out of their “preoccupation with group identity” and “narcissistic particularism” with a perspective they would not achieve on their own.

153 Id.
154 Spragens, Civic Liberalism, p. 89.
3. Agonism and the Problem of Ressentiment

Introduction

“There’s apparently some tension between the Left and the Right,” writer George Saunders observed recently with some levity. Given the acrimony that characterizes our politics, Saunders proposed, “one really great thing…would be if somebody would write a huge, compassionate novel about a real Right-winger—without being snide.” “For me it would be hard,” Saunders went on to acknowledge, “because you know him already.” Finding ourselves in enmity with another, we think we know our opponent – we feel we must know him already, for what other basis would we have to stand in such an adversarial relation? “But,” Saunders cautions, “the truth is: you don’t.”

Our politics suffers from just the attitude Saunders is getting at, one that would make many of us, if called to compose a portrait of our political opponents, undertake to write a satire instead of an attempt to understand through a “huge, compassionate” novel—and the attitude I speak of is ressentiment. The fact that we can relate to the difficulty of undertaking such a task “without being snide” is a sign that ressentiment exists in some measure in most of us, much as we might wish to disavow it. But for some political actors, ressentiment is so deep and so severe as to be characterological. Some in our politics hate their opponents, with the special type of loathing that is ressentiment. The man of ressentiment, according to Max Scheler, perpetrates “an

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illusory devaluation of the other man’s qualities.”

The hostility of ressentiment, this “most dangerous of all explosives,” presents an obstacle to genuine deliberation and healthy democratic discourse every bit as severe as the phenomenon of political narcissism we have just considered. Indeed, Michael Ure has pointed to the danger of ressentiment in a forthcoming paper, stating that “democratic political theory needs to investigate how to prevent socio-political resentment from sliding into ontological ressentiment to avoid the spread of dystopian political ideals and movements.”

In what follows, this chapter argues for agonism as a means for addressing ressentiment—and in doing so, takes an initially counterintuitive direction, given that agonism and democratic deliberation are often considered to be mutually exclusive visions of democracy. Agonism, we should remind ourselves, is a model of democracy that understands the deliberative pursuit of consensus to be both futile and harmful; hence, it emphasizes what it sees as the necessarily contested nature of democratic politics and, while aiming to transform political antagonism into agonism on the basis of “agonistic respect,” nonetheless views democratic politics as pluralist, ever-shifting, and endlessly in dispute. The agon (ἄγων) was, classically, a contest, especially an athletic competition, and hence agonistic democracy brings to mind a striving of competitors. So

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our effort to bring agonism into the mix for the purpose of addressing ressentiment as an obstacle to deliberation might seem initially perplexing, but the still more specific objection could be raised: how could agonism, i.e., open contestation, ameliorate what is the already existing hostility of ressentiment? Why would this not make matters worse? Why should we not argue for, say, the continued suppression of hostility and the perpetuation of “civility” made much of by Guttman and Thompson? Do we not contradict the aims of our own project by calling for an approach seemingly at odds with the espoused tenets of deliberative democracy? Do we not risk the mutual respect that is its sine qua non?

To the contrary, we think that the suppression of political grievances is precisely at the root of ressentiment and is untenable as a strategy for enhancing deliberation. As Timur Kuran has noted, “greater candor may raise social tensions by bringing into focus latent, previously unrecognized conflicts,” but it can also “have the opposite effect by revealing broad agreement on matters that had seemed deeply divisive.” More than that, as I argue here, the phenomenon of ressentiment is generated through suppression and its cure therefore must be a more open airing of grievances, even if that means recognizing unpleasant truths. For that reason, I conceive of agonism not as an end in itself but as a kind of intermediate stage from purely eristic or ideological discourse (or the absence of discourse at all) on the way to genuine deliberation.

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Others in the literature are moving beyond the traditional agonism/deliberation dichotomy as well. For example, Sarah Maddison recently suggested that in divided societies, while “deliberation may be beneficial in assisting elite decision-making, agonistic approaches also have a role to play in smaller-scale civil society contexts aimed at *relational transformation*.”⁷ We think her goal of transforming the relations among participants is the right one, given that *ressentiment* conflict is fundamentally a conflict of identity – and, as such, always involves a hated other. As Biran Ratnesh Nagda has observed, to “address identity-based conflicts, relationship building is valued over immediate resolution.”⁸ We agree that relations among political actors must be transformed if *ressentiment* attitudes are to be dealt with, and believe that agonism is a mechanism for doing so. Of course we see the appropriate relation and admixture of deliberation and agonism somewhat differently than Maddison; we see agonism as an intermediate step on the road to genuine deliberation, though one that may have to remain an abiding part of democratic discourse a sort of valve for tension release. But Maddison’s basic point remains that an agonistic approach is appropriate in some circumstances,⁹ and may not lead “towards agreement” on its own but nonetheless moves

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⁹ Although in “Relational Transformation,” Maddison suggests that deliberation and agonism can co-exist at different levels of democratic discourse, elsewhere she states that “I remain unconvinced that agonistic and deliberative approaches to democratic engagement in divided societies can be easily reconciled, or that the former can ‘expand’ the latter,” conceding however that “[t]his is a question for further empirical study.” See “When Deliberation Remains Out of Reach: the Role of Agonistic Engagement in Divided
“in a direction that enables greater mutual understanding.”10 Agonistic dialogue, according to Maddison, has the “intent of transforming the antagonist in the conflict into a complete, full-bodied entity with whom it might be possible to sympathize.”11 We do not endorse the very structured dialogic approach that Maddison propounds, involving staged dialogue along the lines of “teach-ins” of the 1960’s, partly because the artificiality of staged dialogue strikes us as difficult to sustain or to import into a naturally-occurring political process. We do take her point that in certain settings, such as immediately post-conflict (i.e., post-civil war) societies, staged dialogue may be all that can be realistically hoped for. But even then, one would hope that a spontaneous agonism, and eventually a spontaneous deliberation, would take root and flourish.

We argue that agonism can address ressentiment in two ways: first, through its basic structure, which permits the airing of suppressed grievances, and builds self-respect in ressentiment groups, eventually leading to respect for one’s opponents. Marginalized political groups, I contend, can develop a sense of self-efficacy through robust political contestation and participation, replacing a sense of inferiority and alienation. And through contestation with political opponents of equal or even majority status, these groups can develop the mutual respect that can cause discourse to evolve to the higher level of deliberation. Second, apart from the basic structure of agonism, we argue that

10 Maddison, “Relational Transformation,” p. 3.
11 Id., p. 8, citing Eiskovits, Sympathizing with the Enemy, p. 144.
politically correct speech is actually counterproductive to deliberative aims. For in perpetuating the veneer of “civility,” it straitjackets political discourse and prevents the airing of grievances necessary to address ressentiment. We take our cue from Slavoj Žižek with the suggestion that political correctness can be undermined through a variation of his notion of the “minimal obscenity” through which institutions function. But rather than follow Zizek’s suggestion that we show solidarity with once-marginalized political actors through a playful and tension-diffusing exchange of profanities (e.g., in Zizek’s case, intentionally tasteless racial jokes), my suggestion is closer to Bacon’s tactic which the “deep and sober sort of politic persons”¹² employ to combat envy (which is at the root of and almost co-extensive with ressentiment). Specifically, I suggest that self-deprecating humor – well-used and stereotype-specific – can both undermine political correctness, opening space in discourse for ressentiment minorities to speak more plainly in turn, as well as remove the sting of envy at the core of ressentiment, equalizing participants in discourse.

Let us not be misunderstood: by calling for agonism, we are decidedly not anticipating that merely through repeated clashes, respect will develop. If that were the case, our present politics would be on a promising trajectory, and agonists could take heart as Marxists once did about the historical inevitability of their claims. But we are not saying this; for the mere repetition of political clashes is no more than antagonism, and we are certainly not saying that this will disperse ressentiment and generate mutual

respect. Again, agonism is distinguished from antagonism by the “cultivat[ion] [of] agonistic respect between interlocking and contending constituencies.”\textsuperscript{13} But this confusion and the objection that comes with it is understandable, for while Connolly writes with feeling in his call for agonistic respect, unfortunately he and fellow proponents of such respect – a kind of precursor to the respect needed for deliberation – is terribly vague about how it is supposed to come about. Maddison’s call for agonistic dialogue, staged as it is, is welcome too, but is caught up in a sort of chicken-or-the-egg problem: is respect what is needed for the dialogue to commence, or is it the outcome of the dialogue? One astute observer agrees that “agonistic democrats are equally vulnerable to questions about how the required attitude of ‘agonistic respect’ comes about as deliberative democrats are vulnerable to the question about how the requirement of ‘reasonableness’ is established,”\textsuperscript{14} but offers no answer to the question himself. The literature presents no theory whatsoever about how agonistic respect is to be achieved. The closest is Connolly’s exhortation to so-called “micropolitical practices.”\textsuperscript{15} But as John Lombardini points out, “there is no guarantee that these micropolitical practices will cultivate” agonistic respect and “the risk will always remain that such encounters with

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\textsuperscript{13} Connolly, \textit{Identity/Difference}, p. x.
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difference will provoke reactive responses that feed the drive to convert otherness into evil.”

Accordingly, in what follows, we first look at the specific phenomenon of ressentiment through the lens of Max Scheler, consider its political implications and the existing literature on ressentiment. Then we consider the issue whether agonism and deliberation are in fact mutually exclusive alternatives (in which case our proposed solution might be quixotic). In doing so, we review and amplify a strain of literature which contends that, far from being mutually exclusive endeavors, agonism actually assumes the viability of the deliberative project from the very beginning. To this, we add an additional Gadamerian argument of our own, concluding that the agonist and deliberative projects are by no means in opposition. Next, I offer a story from my own experience involving literal if not political agonism: in particular, my experience from boxing at a virtually all-black gym, and my relationship with a young boxer who (though athletically my superior) nonetheless viewed me with a very clearly ressentiment attitude premised, I sensed, on racial and class differences he seemed to project onto me. I attribute the growth in our relationship to the agonistic structure of our endeavor (there, boxing) as well as to certain devices of self-disclosure on my part which I stumbled onto quite by accident but which, I believe, were useful, and quite transferable to the level of political discourse of concern to us here. Finally, we interpret in Nietzschean terms the usefulness of agonism for addressing ressentiment, recalling Nietzsche’s own account of

ressentiment in the *Genealogy of Morals* and his praise of contestation in *Homer’s Contest*. We further suggest the use of self-deprecating humor as a strategy for self-disclosure that both undermines political correctness and disperses the false images of the other that are part and parcel of ressentiment. We conclude by recalling Chantal Mouffé’s observation (a basic tenet of agonism) that the principles of liberal-democracy are subject to a plurality of interpretation. While we do not follow her in concluding from the outset that consensus is never possible, we agree that interpretation should be conceived as a key issue in democratic discourse (whether conceived as agonistic dialogue or democratic deliberation). We contend that we need canons of interpretation that can ensure that political actors are not marginalized in discourse (and the cycle of ressentiment perpetuated), but before doing so, we consider the viability of a hermeneutical approach to deliberation through a recapitulation of the Gadamer-Habermas debate in the next chapter.

**The Political Problem of Ressentiment**

Having attended in the last chapter to the phenomenon of narcissism, we have already noted that many political actors lack empathy. And this, we argued, disables them from deliberation, for it causes them to overestimate the value of their judgments and prevents them from taking others seriously. The problem of political narcissists, we might say, is that they rate themselves too highly. But there is another problem, encapsulated in the phenomenon of ressentiment, whereby political actors rate each other too low – indeed, with outright hostility. And while the concern of this chapter and this dissertation is the sort of hostility that occurs within a political context – as opposed, say,
to a circumstance where the state no longer functions, such as open civil war – this does not mean that the hostility involved in ressentiment is any less severe than extra-political animus. It is only because the open expression of grievances and hostile motives are not possible that the seeds of ressentiment are able to take hold and flourish in any event. But the subterranean character of ressentiment does not mean that the unexpressed hostility within an apparently functioning political context is any less severe than in a situation of civil war.

Now it is essential to the ressentiment attitude that one’s adversary be disliked, as is obvious from the cognate “resentment.” And in a certain sense this seems trivial and untroubling, for do we not compete in our daily lives among adversaries toward whom we (inwardly at least) allow ourselves a little sneer? But we would not quite call this form of dislike “resentment,” which involves an affront to one’s dignity and aims at “the restoration of wounded honor or recognition-respect.” Adam Smith recognized there are healthy political uses to resentment. According to Michael Ure, Smith’s resentment is “one of the most important emotions through which we can register alleged breaches of justice and elicit others’ indignation against the agents of such normative breaches.”

Stefan Dolgert anticipates Ure’s Smithian distinction between ressentiment and ressentiment, arguing, as Ure does, that there are some positive uses to resentment. But what distinguishes ressentiment from noble indignation is its origin in the most scorching

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18 Id., p. 2.
envy. The oppressed or marginalized man of ressentiment is made to feel his inferiority in the most thoroughgoing way; he says, in Nietzsche’s voice, “If only I were some other person!...but there’s no hope of that. I am who I am: how could I get away from myself?”20 Thus is born the “conspiracy of those who suffer against those who are successful and victorious; here the sight of the victorious man is hated.”21 Finally, the man of ressentiment tries to “alleviate [his] envy” not “by deceiving [himself] that the grapes are sour,” but by the “claim that sweetness itself is evil.”22 But what is emphatically absent from ressentiment, by contrast, and what is present in healthy competition, surely, is respect for one’s opponent – so that wherever ressentiment exists, the “mutual respect” required for genuine deliberation does not.

The seeds of ressentiment take root, according to Scheler, precisely in conditions where such respect is absent, for “in order to arise, slave morality always needs a hostile external world.”23 It is “caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects,” leading to the “tendency to indulge in certain kinds of value delusions and corresponding value judgments,”24 according to which one construes the hostile other, and everything about him, as odious, and so constructs one’s own morality as to oppose it. Nietzsche, of course, had in mind Christian values, but regardless of whether his highly questionable historical account has any validity, his so-to-speak phenomenological account of ressentiment is highly persuasive. For Scheler, inspired by Nietzsche’s

21 Id. (quoting Nietzsche, Genealogy, III.14).
22 Id.
23 Scheler, Ressentiment, p. 24.
24 Id., p. 25.
account, the “thirst for revenge is the most important source of ressentiment.” It is “always preceded by an attack or an injury,” and is distinguished by its necessarily delayed response. Those who crave revenge are those who cannot react in “self-defense” or “reprisal,” says Scheler; hence the desire for revenge is “primarily a matter of those who are ‘weak’ in some respect.”

Yet the desire for revenge, the “envy, impulse to detract, spite, Schadenfreude, and malice lead to ressentiment only if there occurs neither a moral self-conquest…nor an act or some other adequate expression of emotion…and if this restraint is caused by a pronounced awareness of impotence.” Scheler’s example is that of the “ill-treated servant” who, if he “can vent his spleen in the antechamber,” will “remain free from the inner venom of ressentiment, but it will engulf him if he must hide his feelings and keep his negative and hostile emotions to himself.”

Politically, ressentiment is “strongest” in a society where (as in the United States) ostensible equality is coupled with actual inequality: where “approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.” This strongly parallels Wendy Brown’s argument that the “tension between the promises of individualistic liberty and the requisites of equality” inevitably “yields ressentiment.”

25 Id.
26 Id.
27 Id.
29 Id., p. 27.
30 Id., p. 28
For her, it is not inequality, but rather the tension between liberal individualism and
democratic egalitarianism that breeds ressentiment, either as left-populism (democratic
resentment against liberal individualists) or right-antistatism (liberal or libertarian
resentment against egalitarian or socialist state intervention). We certainly find support
for both expressions of ressentiment in the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, which we
shall consider momentarily. But the important point is that Brown thinks ressentiment is
propagated by the very combination of liberalism with democracy. Brown, no ally of the
deliberative project, thinks that “[l]iberalism contains from its inception a generalized
incitement to what Nietzsche terms ressentiment, the moralizing revenge of the
powerless, the ‘triumph of the weak as weak.’”31 And since deliberative democracy is
emphatically a liberal democratic project or, as Mouffe and others have pointed out,
aspires to be, ressentiment remains a danger and potential obstacle for deliberation. As to
Brown’s specific political diagnosis and prescription, more later. But if suffices to say
that Brown thinks we need to address the strong possibility of ressentiment in our
discourse.

According to one historian, the “arrogant bigotry of ressentiment inheres precisely
in this slandering and besmirching of those qualities and persons that are authentically
good in order to erect and alternative, and pernicious, conception of the good on the basis
of just such negations.”32 Political actors animated by ressentiment are engaged in what
Oliver Ramsbotham calls “radical disagreement,” where “substantive issues are

surrounded by a penumbra of emotion” and political actors “blame each other” and “justify themselves.”

Witness in this vein the reactionary right-wing movement of the Tea Party, which culminated in the election of a number of relatively inexperienced, and significantly more conservative, candidates to Congress in the 2010 mid-term elections. The shocking loss of Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor to a then-unknown Tea Party candidate in the Republican primary was a striking example of the movement’s power – and of its opposition to what it perceived as the “establishment,” not limited to its stereotype of “liberal elites” but including even conservatives not receptive to its populist ideals. Those studying the Tea Party at the time found in “Tea Party populism” a “ressentiment of the ‘evil’ elites considered the ‘enemy.’” Its “fury” was “interpreted as a right-wing populist form of Nietzschean ressentiment that blames elites above (Obama and Democrats) and the threatening classes below (poor blacks and immigrants) for their misfortune.” It reminds us of an earlier reactionary ressentiment premised on what Jeffrey Nealon called “white male anger,” expressed through figures like Pat Buchanan and Rush Limbaugh, and more disturbingly through Timothy McVeigh.

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“White men are angry these days,” Nealon declared, and traced its origins to 

$\textit{ressentiment}$.\textsuperscript{37}

Many of the same motives might be said to have animated a $\textit{ressentiment}$ movement of the left, the Occupy Wall Street protests of late 2011, whose “target” was “the whole financial and capitalist system.”\textsuperscript{38} Opposing itself to the so-called “1%” – a designation for wealthy elites apparently originating in Joseph Stiglitz’s critique\textsuperscript{39} of economic inequality in the United States that appeared earlier that year – the movement bears many of the same hallmarks. The movement’s slogan, “We are the 99%,” savors of that sense of inferiority which is the telltale sign of $\textit{ressentiment}$; the implication is that “we” are good and “they” are evil. It is no stretch of social analysis to say that, at a minimum, the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements share a certain populism, a certain oppositional relationship to an Other – whether in the costume of “liberal elites” or “Wall Street” executives.

Now whether the actual participants of these movements were as oppressed as their rhetoric would lead us to believe is another layer of analysis entirely. Certainly the demographic character of Occupy Wall Street suggests that many of the supporters were rather well-situated: with 60% having college degrees and 30% with incomes over $50,000.\textsuperscript{40} And according to Slavoj Zizek, who was present during the protests and made

\textsuperscript{39} Joseph Stiglitz, “Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%,” \textit{Vanity Fair} (May 2011).
\textsuperscript{40} Capriles, \textit{Leadership by Resentment}, p. 26.
speeches to the assembled crowds, one of the young protestors stated: “They are asking us what is our program. We have no program. We are here to have a good time.”41 All this may have more to do with the absence of tangible political successes from Occupy Wall Street, as compared with the very visible and striking (if perhaps short-lived) successes of the Tea Party. Both of these, I claim, emerged from a similar set of attitudes and grievances as may be classed under the general rubric of ressentiment. One could say however that the “core” of the Tea Party movement was much broader than that of Occupy Wall Street, since the unabashed admission of the young protestors – “we are here to have a good time” – is not one of ressentiment but of youthful insouciance. Occupy Wall Street may have attracted wider sympathies than the Tea Party, though with much less impetus for concrete political action. But the basic point is that movements which spring from such motives manifest a remarkable political intransigence that is anti-deliberative to the core; whether we might be incidentally attracted to their political aims is irrelevant. Tea Party legislators are well-known as the most uncompromising in the Congress, responsible in part for the recent resignation of Republican House Speaker John Boehner, whom they refused to support owing to his repeated willingness to reach accommodations with Democrats. Such intransigence, and the hostility and lack of respect that accompany it, is an obvious problem for deliberation.

Ressentiment lies beneath more than organized political movements, of course. As Rebecca Stringer has observed, much of contemporary feminist discourse has been

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characterized by ressentiment, “less than [an] immoveable keystone[] of feminist thought,” but “more than [a] passing or past phase[].” She finds it in the tendency toward “feminist victimology,” according to which “women are victims of power, where power is understood exclusively as man’s capacity to dominate.” Hence, “victim feminism proffers definitive judgment on good and evil with reference to sexual difference and thereby ‘casts women themselves as good and men themselves as wrong.’” Stringer cites such feminists as Rene Denfeld, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf, who all agree that “victim feminism has been breeding in the academy since the late 1970s,” concluding that “[f]eminist victimology can be considered as an effect of ressentiment.” And while agreeing herself that much feminist discourse is characterized by what Derrida calls “reactive feminism,” Stringer sees ressentiment in the anti-ressentiment critiques, as well: for as Stringer crucially and insightfully notes, the fact of “reactive feminism” does not “mean that critical accounts of victimology cannot themselves be seen as motivated by ressentiment,” and she goes so far as to assert that “the crucial indictments of feminist victimology produced by Roiphe and Denfeld in

43 Id., p. 249 (emphasis original).
particular have appropriated tactics and affective drive of victimology and have thereby reproduced it.”48

Applying Stringer’s point generally and in the context of our present endeavor, we must always be the alert to the presence of ressentiment attitudes even in purported critiques of ressentiment, such as ours. Fortunately, what we are engaged in doing is not simply expressing horror at this very human phenomenon (“Nothing human is strange to me,” Montaigne says), nor do we wish to address it through banishment or further repression. Rather, we are trying to invite ressentiment political actors into the discourse in a manner that recognizes their dignity, with the hope that agonism itself will dampen their hostility, especially when pursued through certain self-disclosing and envy-inhibiting strategies we will suggest later.

Now, how does ressentiment align with that other obstacle to deliberation, political narcissism? No doubt each of these problems could be construed as the flipside of the other: grandiosity could easily imply hostility, and hostility may well be the sign of grandiose pretensions. And indeed, these conditions may often be “comorbid,” to put it rather clinically. But we believe the phenomena are distinct, and have different origins. For one thing, the narcissistic view of others is more in the nature of contempt than of outright hostility. Narcissists need others to support their self-image. Those afflicted with ressentiment, by contrast, have a clear vision of “the enemy,” and define themselves accordingly.

48 Id., p. 258 (emphasis added).
Deliberation necessarily involves disagreement; if it did not, of course, there would be no reason for deliberating and the unified polity would proceed as with one mind in accord with the general will. As the site of disagreement, deliberation might be thought fertile ground for potentially adversarial relationships, and this intuition is not entirely wrong. It’s no accident that Young believes “[d]eliberation is competition” involving actors whose aim it is to “win the argument, not to achieve mutual understanding.”\footnote{Iris Marion Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” in Benhabib, ed. 
Democracy and Difference, p. 123.} Strictly speaking, as we maintain throughout this dissertation, genuine deliberation is decidedly \textit{not} a forum for debate – at least not for the conscious use of demagogy. However much deliberation must admit certain modes of communication, such as “rhetoric” and “storytelling,”\footnote{Id., pp. 130-131} to accommodate the “speech culture of women and racial minorities,”\footnote{Id. p. 124.} genuine deliberation is the forum where the “unforced force of the better argument” prevails.\footnote{Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, 308.} As Dryzek reminds us, “[d]eliberation is different from adversarial debate,” for the “initial aim is not to win, but to understand.”\footnote{Dryzek, “The Australian Citizens’ Parliament: A World First,” Journal of Public Deliberation, Vol. 5 (2009), p. 3.}

Nevertheless, Young has a point: much of what passes for deliberation has the character of contestation. And as Dryzek implies, the initial aim of deliberation may be understanding but the ultimate aim must be action; some arguments must “win” out, and some must be rejected, if course of action is ever to be settled upon. Yet where disagreement persists, i.e., wherever consensus is not the outcome of deliberation, there is
certainly a risk that the deliberative process may be called into question. The empirical evidence suggests that “perceived disagreement” discourages “communicative participation.” As one study put it, “participants may emerge from contentious deliberations feeling that talk and persuasion are not viable means to influence others.”

Indeed, as another study found, deliberation that is highly contentious and fails to achieve consensus can motivate participants to take extra-deliberative action: “disagreement perceived during deliberation mobilized extreme participants to public and confrontational actions.” Gutmann and Thompson are certainly aware of this, acknowledging the “real risk” that deliberation could “create even greater conflict than it is intended to resolve.” This only highlights the need for us to address ressentiment in our discourse.

We might say that ressentiment is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the “civic friendship” called for by Spragens, while the “mutual respect” necessary to deliberation forming some mean between them (and likely closer to Spragens’ ideal). The emergence of civic friendship would certainly be welcome, but we take it that we have our work cut out for us in addressing with just ressentiment. Spragens is quite right that “hostile sentiments and aggressive inclinations are almost unfailingly mitigated to a

56 Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, p. 44.
57 Spragens, Civic Liberalism, pp. 175-212.
great extent when one forms a friendship with someone” from a group perceived as one’s adversary “or when it is discovered that an already valued friend is of the problematic persuasion.”58 But where *ressentiment* attitudes prevail, such friendships are unlikely to form in the first place. We need an intermediate approach that addresses *ressentiment* before we can expect that civic friendships may form. And as earlier acknowledged, just calling for “agonistic respect” without more, as Connolly, Mouffe, and other agonists in the literature have done, is not enough to deal with the very real obstacle to such respect that is *ressentiment*.

One pathological aspect of *ressentiment* manifests even (dare one say) in our theoretical discourse: as boundless critique. *Ressentiment* has, after all, a negating, i.e., destructive function. As Scheler noticed, “a secret *ressentiment* underlies every way of thinking which attributes creative power to mere negation and criticism.”59 This is by no means to say that the critical impulse in political theory, for example, or place of critique in poststructuralist and continental thought broadly understood has somehow arisen from *ressentiment*. The point of this chapter is not to impute unwholesome motives or to mount attacks ad hominem. Rather, it is to suggest that *ressentiment* might not be wholly absent from our theoretical discourse as it most assuredly is not absent from our everyday political goings-on, and that *ressentiment* critique represents a pathological version of genuine critique. It has certainly been a long-standing problem of post-structuralism’s critical bent that “as numerous critics have noted…poststructuralist analysis of power and

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58 Spragens, *Civic Liberalism*, p. 196.
subjectivity provides with no real way of drawing distinctions between political ideals and movements that might be more legitimate, freedom-enhancing, rational, and so on, than others.”60 The problem, White implies, is that poststructuralism is ever on the attack. And of course, about poststructuralist thought in particular White may well be wrong. But his point could be generalized to illustrate the pathological mode of ressentiment critique. Michael Roth certainly finds an excessively critical impulse is being inculcated through undergraduate education: a “humanities culture in which being smart often means being a critical unmasker” is leading to the a “confident refusal to be affected by those with whom we disagree.”61

And ressentiment may be present in other elements of our discourse as well – for example, in the flight from “theory” to “common sense.” For example, one writer valorizes the “wisdom of repugnance,” asserting that “in crucial cases, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason’s power fully to articulate it”62—and true this may be, but how may we distinguish this lofty notion from its ressentiment cousin? As Martin Amis relates, “in their written works and their table talk, Hitler and Stalin (and Lenin) seldom let the abstract noun ‘reason’ go by without assigning a scornful adjective to it: worthless reason, craven reason, cowardly reason. When those sanguinary yokels, the Taliban, chant their slogan, ‘Throw reason to the dogs,’ they are

making the same kind of Faustian gamble: crush reason, kill reason, and anything and everything seems possible – the restored Caliphate for instance, presiding over a planetary empire cleansed of all infidels.”63 Ruth Capriles, referring to the “ressentiment of terrorism,” finds it essential to the terrorist outlook, a disturbing observation when we recall reactionary domestic terrorists like McVeigh. In our own discourse, how would we distinguish between a noble and good faith turn from reason to repugnance on the one hand (similar to Smith’s positive notion of “resentment”), and the spiteful, seething ressentiment rejection of reason on the other?

Foucault, for example, singles out discourses “that make one laugh” as targets of critique, implicitly creating a sort of ‘laugh-test’ for judgment.64 But here again, how to distinguish between the noble laughter of Foucault, and the scornful, degrading laughter of ressentiment? The spectacle of laughter at a party rally is an image of the latter; for example, in the American political context, the endless jokes about the character of republican/democrat or liberal/conservative, engaging mainly to the true believers. Without grandiosity or here, ressentiment, it is difficult to see how such jokes even amuse.65 “The importance of mockery for” the success of critique could just as well be

65 Cf. Spragens, *Reason and Democracy*, p. 7 (“popular acceptance by itself is in any case an achievement but not an argument.”)
“an indirect proof of the irrefutability” of the thing mocked, since the victorious of satire are “very ambiguous evidences of the just case, or rather…none at all.”"66

If ressentiment pervades not only our political but our theoretical discourse, it is clear that we need some means of addressing it and establishing some form of respect in its place. Before suggesting our own (agonistic) approach, we turn to the problem whether agonism and deliberation are truly contradictory alternatives and hence whether the agonistic solution to ressentiment proposed here can be of use to a deliberative project.

**Agonism is Compatible With Deliberative Democracy**

In what follows, we review, amplify and partially agree with the line of literature that argues against agonism’s claim of incompatibility with deliberative democracy and finds the two projects to be complementary. We offer an additional reason for their compatibility: against agonism’s claim that consensus is impossible because language is always subject to a plurality of “practices,” we oppose Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons” according to which understanding is indeed possible across differing perspectives and forms of life.

A small but persuasive strain of literature, represented by Andrew Knops and George Vasilev, contends that agonism and democratic deliberation are not only not mutually exclusive, but that the former assumes the latter.67 Although “agonism” has

many exponents, we take as representative the work of Chantal Mouffe in *The Democratic Paradox*. Her work, as she observes, “dovetails with the work” of that other great proponent of agonism, William Connolly, in that “both consider that it is vital for a pluralist democratic politics to expose and acknowledge paradoxes instead of trying to conceal or transcend them through appeals to rationality or community.”68 It is also in accord with Derrida’s notion of the “constitutive outside.”69

The basic disagreement between Mouffe and deliberative democrats is the relationship of power and politics. For deliberative democrats, it is the “unforced force of the better argument”70 that can and should prevail in politics. Legitimacy of political action, as we saw at the outset of this project, is premised on its being the outcome of democratic deliberative procedures. So little is “power” thought to play a role (at least as a regulative ideal) that until relatively recently, the vision of deliberation has been one that was eminently rational, free of emotion. As we have discussed, the resurgence of interest in rhetoric as a means to address the problem of persistent disagreement in deliberation is of recent vintage, as is the point made by feminist writers that forms of deliberative communication, abasing as they do the role of emotion in discourse, have exclusionary implications for women and minorities. For deliberative democrats,

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68 Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 16 n.3.
69 Id., p. 21.
70 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 308.
“power” as such really has no legitimate role in discourse and is something to be regarded with suspicion.

However, for Mouffe and proponents of agonism generally, “power is constitutive of social relations.”71 Hence “antagonism” is “inherent in human relations” and, unavoidably, in democracy.72 And because Mouffe, following Schmitt, believes that political identity is constituted by an us/them relation, seeking consensus as deliberative democracy does is an exercise in futility. Since Mouffe construes “the political” as the antagonism of human relations, “to arrive at [the] consensus” aimed at by deliberation “would imply the eradication of the political.”73 Recognizing this, the aim of an agonistic model of democracy is to alter the us/them relation in such a way that the democratic “other” is “no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary,’ that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.”74 The democratic adversaries Mouffe envisions obviously differ strongly from the rather peaceable deliberative participants assumed by Habermas or by Gutmann and Thompson.

In any event, Mouffe’s project has been subject to a great deal of criticism. Here I focus on the criticism relevant to our objective, which is to demonstrate that the agonistic project – besides having certain redeeming features – is not constituted in opposition to the deliberative one, but actually assumes it. This argument has been advanced

71 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 98 (emphasis added).
72 Id., p. 101.
73 Id., p. 101.
74 Id., p. 102.
persuasively by Andrew Knops, who points out in the first place that, while Mouffe
denies that a rational consensus may ever be reached, she simultaneously invites us to
recognize “the dimension of undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonism which
are constitutive of the political,”\textsuperscript{75} that power is inherent in the construction of political
relationships, and political identity is always formed in opposition to the other. Actually
one could say here in opposition to Knops and in support of Mouffe – and not only as a
slight joke – that Knops’s criticism of Mouffe’s project actually \textit{proves} her point that “a
rational consensus…cannot exist” in “the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{76} Knops is an avowed critic of
Mouffe, and for Mouffe to be right, her paradigm could never be the \textit{exclusive} mode of
democratic functioning, it \textit{must} be opposed – as indeed it is, by Knops. Under Mouffe’s
assumptions, there could never be a consensus as to the viability of the agonistic
paradigm; there would always have to be deliberative democrats, or other approaches,
railing against it.

But even allowing this in all seriousness, Knops’s point is that Mouffe makes “a
universal claim about the political.”\textsuperscript{77} And, of course, by using rational means to
persuade us of her claim, implicitly Mouffe indicates that the possibility of
“establish[ing] such a universal model of politics through rational argument.”\textsuperscript{78} In effect,
Knops catches Mouffe in a performative contradiction. She has invited us to join her in a
consensus that political consensus can never be reached. This line of attack might appear

\textsuperscript{75} Id., p. 105.
\textsuperscript{76} Mouffe, \textit{Democratic Paradox}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{78} Id., p. 116.
a bit cheap in light of Mouffe’s obvious subtlety and intelligence. Connolly, for one, certainly wearies quickly at charges of performative contradiction, imputing to critics who make such charges “the tacit assumption that the world conforms to a logic to be grasped through precise concepts.”79 But since Connolly apparently offers no other means than logic for his own analyses or the expression of his ideas, the problem of performative contradiction cannot be ruled out as so outré that we have to ignore obvious logical problems, at least not without their dialectical resolution (also absent in Connolly). Anyway, there is more to Knops’s objection than this.

Mouffe insists that “we have a shared adhesion [sic] to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy.”80 But as Knops rightly points out, “Mouffe still owes an explanation of how there can be such a consensus in the first place.”81 In other words, contrary to what we half-humorously suggested above, Mouffe actually does demand a universal consensus – on liberal democratic principles. One might say against Knops that this apparently contradictory call to consensus is somehow canceled out by the fact of her acknowledgment that the “meaning” and “implementation” of these principles will, and must, be endlessly contested, but that is not the only consensus Mouffe demands. Knops notes that Mouffe demands we recognize our adversaries’ “right to defend” the ideas we “combat.”82 Knops does go too far in attributing to Mouffe a demand for “a mutual

79 Connolly, Identity/Difference, p. xv.
respect for beliefs”83 among democratic agonists; the most Mouffe says is we must treat them “as legitimate opponents.”84 Mutual respect, in my view, is a step beyond what is required among democratic agonists, even that agonistic respect of Connolly – and it is the contention of this chapter that agonism could lead the mutual respect required for deliberation; it certainly does not presume it at the outset. Rather it presumes an initial antagonism (of which ressentiment is the form we are concerned with here), as Mouffe recognizes. While Knops errs in concluding that Mouffe requires “some overlap with the principles of equal respect and autonomy underlying the deliberative approach,”85 he is quite right to point out that she nonetheless requires a consensus on democratic values – something flatly in contradiction with her critique of deliberative democracy. And he is right also in pointing out that Mouffe tries to place a thumb on the scale, for while one might imagine that her avowed opposition to universalism and consensus would lead her to endorse a radical pluralism, in fact Mouffe distinguishes her position “from the type of extreme pluralism that emphasizes heterogeneity and incommensurability.”86 For Mouffe, in spite of the apparently more democratic character of such a position, “such a perspective prevents us from recognizing how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged.”87 In other words, Mouffe thinks that agonism necessarily works against certain forms of democratic pluralism, i.e., has a necessary universal content that must be defended.

84 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 102.
86 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 20.
87 Id., p. 20.
Knops wants to show not only (1) that this is another example of a demand for “consensus” that has to be reached through “rational means” (i.e., Mouffe’s own arguments”), the very consensus that was declared to be impossible, but (2) that “the content of [Mouffe’s] formula looks remarkably like the method for reaching collective decisions through a procedure for rational discussion that deliberative theorists support.”88 In this way, Knops wants to show that Mouffe not only undermines her arguments against deliberative democracy, but that her version of agonism actually resembles deliberation, at least that it includes many of the same elements. We agree with Knops’s first claim, but disagree with his second. As already suggested, Mouffe’s variation of agonistic respect does not equate to the “mutual respect” of deliberative participants as Knops claims.

For Mouffe, consensus is impossible for an additional reason. Politics may be fundamentally premised on antagonistic power relations, but even it this were not true, the “rationalistic framework”89 of deliberation in inadequate. Mouffe averts to Wittgenstein in the hope of putting forth “a new way of theorizing about the political, one that breaks with the universalizing and homogenizing mode that has informed most of liberal theory since Hobbes.”90 Roughly, because according to Wittgenstein language does not have a fixed meaning, instead developing its meaning through use in “practice”

89 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 60.
90 Mouffe, p. 61 (emphasis original).
and corresponding to various “language games” and particular forms of life, Mouffe concludes that reaching consensus is impossible. Any agreement is possible only because the language of the participants is based on a shared mode of life. Agreement is “based not on significations but on forms of life,” i.e., language is comprehensible only because participants in the “language game” share this mode of living, which is to say that they practice their language in the same manner. Mouffe concludes from this that deliberative consensus is impossible and that it is “possible to follow the democratic rules in a plurality of ways,” among which it is impossible to adjudicate except through agonism, i.e., a kind of struggle, versus rational deliberation. Hence, this time it is not identity or power relations but the nature of language that precludes consensus and compels pluralism.

But as Knops points out, Wittgenstein accepts the mode of “explanation” as legitimate for “someone unfamiliar with a practice, who would like to understand that practice.” To give the actual quote from Wittgenstein: “an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding.” True, Wittgenstein says this in the context of a discussion of infinite regress of explanation; if I encounter a word with which I am unfamiliar, what is to guarantee that I will understand the words offered in the

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91 Here it’s worth noting that the “language game” is a Wittgensteinian term of art, whose “very elusiveness” is “illustrated by the constant changes in the way the term is written.” Its precise definition is therefore no easy feat. See Chris Lawn, Wittgenstein and Gadamer: Towards a Post-Analytic Philosophy of Language (Continuum: New York, 2006), p. 22.
92 Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 73.
93 Id., p. 70.
95 Wittgenstein, para. 87.
explanation given to me? But he also allows that “none [i.e., no other explanation] stands in need of another—unless we require it to prevent a misunderstanding.”96 Hence Wittgenstein would certainly seem to admit the possibility of communication across different linguistic “practices” through “explanation” of this kind. And as Knops points out, this is very much what deliberation does. I might refrain from the leap Knops makes according to which Wittgenstein “characterizes the offering of reasons as a kind of ‘explanation,’”97 since the section cited from Wittgenstein does not appear to me to involve the offering of a reason. That form of explanation appears more as: this is what it means to me. But we would agree that if this sort of explanation can enable understanding across forms of life, then higher-order discourse (e.g., deliberation) would be possible. And in support of this line of argument, Knops refers to an example from James Tully (on whom Mouffe relies) involving “interlocutors who have different views of the use of language.”98 When misunderstanding occurs in conversation, this elicits a “process of trial and error [through which] we build up a shared vocabulary…and in the process we understand the other’s form of life that gave rise to their unexpected use.”99 And even if that process of coming to understanding is not itself “the process of deliberation”100 as Knops claims but is preliminary to it, it certainly opens the way.

To this we would add a further example: Gadamer’s fusion of horizons. It is actually surprising that Mouffe has never engaged with Gadamer, given her evident

96 Id.
98 Id., p. 122.
99 Id.
100 Id.
sophistication and familiarity with the continental tradition; in her work we can find no more than the passing reference to Gadamer in *The Return of the Political*. In spite of this curious oversight, we understand Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons” to be responsive to both Mouffe’s Schmittian argument (that antagonism is constitutive of identity) and her Wittgensteinian point (that the uncertainty of linguistic practices, and forms of life in which these are grounded, necessarily rules out deliberative consensus). In fact it follows her Wittgensteinian argument very closely in certain important respects, yet arrives at the *opposite* conclusion – that understanding, and hence deliberation, is possible.

According to Gadamer, each of us occupies a “standpoint that limits the possibility of vision.” Situated thus, our “horizon” extends only so far as what can be seen from that vantage. In order to understand one another in conversation, or indeed to comprehend a text from a different historical era, we must “transpose ourselves into the horizon from which the traditionary text” (or the individual) “speaks” – otherwise, “we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us.”

But here Mouffe’s Wittgenstein would throw up an obstacle, for “to agree on the definition of a term is not enough, and we need agreement in the way we use it.” The text (or individual) we are trying to understand may well be involved in a different language game from our own. We cannot merely apprehend that the language game of

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103 Id., p. 302.
104 Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 68.
the other is premised on a differing form of life, and hope that this will reveal their meaning. We need to know how to use that language, i.e., to apprehend the rule(s) governing its usage. But because merely attempting to follow a rule does not govern its application to particular cases, our understanding still has an indeterminate character. Mouffe’s point is that deliberation could therefore never resolve differences, because “the multiplicity of [language] uses is too various, tangled, contested and creative to be governed by rules,”\textsuperscript{105} or rather that even when governed by rules, that alone does not determine their meaning. As Wittgenstein points out, “following a rule is analogous to obeying an order…But what if one person reacts in one way and another to another to the order…? Which one is right?”\textsuperscript{106} The example Mouffe adduces from Wittgenstein is that of the signpost pointing in a particular direction: “A rule stands there like a signpost…But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?”\textsuperscript{107}

The basic issue here, putting aside the focus on language, really does not originate with Wittgenstein. The problem is one of application: for we may have rules, but according to what rules do we apply them? And according to what rule do we decide that the given case (or, relevant to Mouffe’s concern, the given linguistic term or political principle) falls under a rule? The problem goes back at least as far as Kant, who

concluded that “logic contains, and can contain, no rules for judgment,”108 i.e., for application. A rule, “for the very reason that it is a rule…demands guidance from judgment.”109 Therefore, “though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practiced only, and cannot be taught.”110 There is then a fundamental discontinuity between rule and application. Of course Kant’s own solution to this was to substitute for traditional logic his own “transcendental” logic,111 whose “peculiarity” was “that besides the rule…which is given in the pure concept of understanding, it can also specify a priori the instances to which the rule is to be applied.”112 As Herbert Schnadelbach helpfully puts it, this “signifies that whoever has at their disposal transcendental rules, should at the same time have at their disposal a priori rules for the application of rules, without requiring further rules of application for these rules for the application of rules and thereby falling into the trap of an infinite regress.”113

Lest we be pulled away into this massive and engrossing subject, we will have to leave it at the observation that the problem for Mouffe is a problem of judgment and the necessity of supplying proper application to every instance of a “rule” or “principle” or linguistic “term” in a way not included within the rule, principle, or term. Now, as

109 Id.
110 Id.
112 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B174.
Wittgenstein states in a passage not cited by Mouffe or Knops, but one which puts her own point much more clearly, “[f]or a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”

Mouffe wants us to understand that linguistic practices are constitutive of meaning, and that words are not susceptible to unified definition. Hence, she wants us to conclude analogously that democracy, too, is constituted by practice and cannot be unified under the banner of the deliberative project. But the relation is not solely one of analogy; since the democratic practice of deliberation is conducted through language, and its goal is consensus, the particular variant of democratic practice that is deliberation is understood as self-defeating. Because deliberation is conducted through language, and language necessarily involves a plurality of language games, the goal of consensus is necessarily futile.

Yet Gadamer begins from similar premises as Wittgenstein, and arrives at the opposite conclusion – that understanding is possible. As David Vessey puts it, on Gadamer’s account, “participants in a dialogue” may “not necessarily” reach “agreement” but nonetheless they are able reach “a shared understanding about the subject matter” under deliberation. Gadamer regards the “central problem of hermeneutics” as a “problem of application, which is to be found in all understanding.”

As he explains, “application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the

114 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, para. 43 (emphasis added).
phenomenon of understanding, but *codetermines it as a whole from the beginning,*” for “the interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself,”—just as the human being looking for guidance from ethical principles might try to apply them to himself—“but this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications.”¹¹⁷ What he means is that our prejudice or “fore-understanding” is the condition of our understanding of a text or standard of justice.

In other words, Gadamer agrees with Wittgenstein that the interpretation of a rule (or practice or “term” or principle) is like the interpretation of a text, i.e., is a kind of application. Gadamer and Wittgenstein agree with Kant’s indictment of formal logic—not his aspirations for transcendental logic—that the application of a rule, practice, or principle requires judgment. But Gadamer does not conclude from this that understanding or consensus is impossible. Rather, he believes that the horizon of the interpreter merges with that of the text (or deliberative interlocutor). And as we have seen, Wittgenstein seems to imply something similar in conceding that “explanation” is possible across language games.

Hence, neither Mouffe’s Wittgenstein, nor the analogous line of thought in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, seem to support her conclusion that consensus is impossible and the deliberative project is therefore futile, or that agonism is at odds with it. Let us

¹¹⁷ Id, p. 321.
therefore turn to agonism in the hope that it may assist us in addressing *ressentiment*
resistance to deliberation.

**Boxing with Ressentiment: an Example of Agonism in Practice**

Let me begin with a story from my own experience which, while not strictly
political, nonetheless gives a sense of how *ressentiment* attitudes function in practice, and
indicates, I think, the beginnings of a way out – not altogether accidentally, through
agonism. For a few years I trained in (amateur) boxing. *Pace* those who know the
tribulations of dissertation-writing, it was easily the most difficult endeavor of my life,
and not least for the following reason: the first gym I trained from was almost entirely
black; I was clearly perceived as white (as I am not, but recognize I meet the stereotype)
as somehow prosperous, as emphatically “other” than its inhabitants. I made the mistake
of wearing shirts with my college name and logo emblazoned thereon. It would not be an
overstatement to say I was eyed with suspicion, indeed with a barely concealed hostility.
The one friendly face was my boxing coach, also black and himself a fighter there, with
whom I’d formed an unlikely connection premised on his patience and generosity.

One day I was there warming up (20 minutes jumping rope, which in the early
days had seemed impossibly long), and I overheard my coach greeting another young
boxer who’d just arrived. “We’re letting these types in here now, I see?” the young boxer
said, unmistakably meaning me and looking in my direction (university logo on my
chest). One or two words may be garbled but this was the unmistakable import of it. My
coach said something good-humored and that was the end of the exchange. But I was
thereafter alert to the attitude of this boxer (we’ll call him Chris). He might plausibly have been dismissive, or a bit contemptuous, of some newcomer, especially one as green as I was, but what I sensed from him was a palpable and unexplained hostility. And it was an interesting reenactment on his part, I later felt – had this young man himself been perceived as one of “these types” and excluded as such? Had he been made to feel as an inferior “other” and was he now eyeing me with the same exclusionary gaze? Whatever “these types” signified and whatever they represented to him, he certainly saw the gym as properly a reprieve or sanctuary from such people, a space that my presence invaded. What I mean to suggest here is that, in spite of the non-threatening position I should have occupied in relation to him, and did in fact occupy – untalented and green as I was, compared to the richness of his expertise and ability – somehow he construed my presence as that of a vaguely threatening antagonist.

Naturally, Chris and I were thrown together to train and spar. And what I noticed was the strange relation wherein my actual incompetence and nonthreatening demeanor contrasted with the wariness with which he evidently regarded me. Of course this scenario differs from the more typical ressentiment constellation wherein a generally more powerful figure or class prevents a generally inferior figure from expressing indignation at some actual or perceived slight or oppression and, in light of the actual power disparity that remains, the feelings must find expression through some form of imagined revenge; here it was I who occupied the actually inferior position, yet a somehow threatening image was projected onto me. In spite of our actual standing, his projection was one of ressentiment. Whereas others might tolerate me or at least conceal
their exasperation with me, Chris behaved as though a villain had come on scene whenever I showed up.

I tried various strategies for breaking the ice: after we’d spar and invariably I had the worse of it, I made an effort to smile and say “Thanks for beating up on me a little bit!,” which actually made him laugh. Obviously, for my part, I was saving face here; this wasn’t an exercise in good-natured ice-breaking. I had to respond in such a way as would not betray how painful circumstances were for me. It was not quite my own exercise in *ressentiment*, for I did not perceive myself slighted, but nonetheless in the context of boxing, it would not have been well-received if I had given voice to my own misgivings.

But here is the important thing: had I responded *without* an open, joking acknowledgment of his superior skill, had I slunk away, would this not have *perpetuated* his attitude toward me? I would have remained whatever figure he’d made me out to be, and his attitudes toward “me” and other such villains would have remained unchanged. Through such exchanges, his attitude did in fact shift, I believe. I asked him to teach me things; I asked his opinion; I told him how hard the others hit (but I did not flatter him, not wishing to be obsequious, either); I let him overhear me express my genuine wonder and respect for the talent of fighters he, too, respected. Again, none of these measures were planned or undertaken from a position of strength or security on my part – this was not social outreach, but survival. I will not claim that we ever became friends thereby, though to call us friendly would not be inaccurate. And I think by the end of my time boxing there, Chris saw me no longer as potentially malevolent but rather a sometimes
loveable goof, no threat whatsoever, with just enough ability to “hang in there” and an unfeigned passion for the sport that rendered me a basically tolerable and more or less respected addition to the gym.

Now how, exactly, did this happen? In two ways, I suggest. **First**, in the structure of agnostic endeavor itself, which is *self-disclosing*, I claim. Remember George Saunders’ point that, were we to write a “huge, compassionate” portrait of our political opponents “without being snide,” it would be hard because “you think you know him.” This is emphatically true of *ressentiment*, through which a false image of one’s opponent is built up, and in fact one’s own identity is structured in opposition to it. Whatever is true of one’s opponent becomes “evil,” as Nietzsche and Scheler attest. At the same time, as Nietzsche points out, the man of *ressentiment* carries with him a subterranean self-loathing. I claim that agonism involves inevitable self-disclosure that chips away at the false, somewhat magnified (even while denigrated) caricature of one’s enemy built up by *ressentiment*, even as it builds up self-respect in place of self-loathing, because the man of *ressentiment*, in daring to enter a situation of contestation, is inevitably taken seriously by his opponent. Even in the worst of circumstances, such as mis-matched contests, the weaker or minority party is indeed taken seriously, i.e., treated with some respect, until the outcome of the contest is certain. The boxing idiom “a puncher’s chance” is indicative of the possibility of victory that the weaker party may have even in a contest which seems obviously unfair. And indeed we have seen such unexpected victories by *ressentiment* political actors, such as the Tea Party victories in Congressional elections. One is tempted to infer from this that agonistic victory alone is effective in
curing *ressentiment*, for not only participation in the contest but the victory itself could be construed as the very revenge longed for by *ressentiment*. Such victory could be thought of an affective discharge that reverses the repression causing *ressentiment*. That is one reason why Scheler thinks “parliamentary institutions…are highly important as discharge mechanisms for mass and group emotions.”¹¹⁸ And one could see the flaming out of the Tea Party in the wake of its Congressional victories as functioning this way. Still, I maintain that such a momentary discharge is not enough to transform the identity of *ressentiment* political actors, and that a more sustained participation in agonism is necessary. Would Chris have come to see me differently if we had boxed once and he had me knocked down? That might have been a delicious moment of revenge for him but would not, I think, have convinced him that I was not the despicable figure he made me out to be. Likewise, it would have done little to diminish whatever ill-feeling he anticipated from me (and figures like me) on account of his own identity (as black and therefore marginalized? impoverished? physically rather small? the provenance of his *ressentiment* is still a mystery to me).

*Second*, I suggest that my relationship with Chris improved because of a certain strategy of self-disclosure that was (again accidentally) especially antidotal for his *ressentiment*. It happened in the following way: frequently in my experience boxing, I would lapse into some obscenity the import of which was the (humorous) expression of pain or exhaustion. Now one might imagine the atmosphere would have been thick with

¹¹⁸ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 42.
this sort of thing, but just the opposite was the case. This was in fact relatively rare – which is not to say that people did not communicate through profanity, but the profanity was very rarely employed to express pain or exhaustion – precisely because the acknowledgement of these phenomena was transgressive. Nobody wanted to say “that hurt” or give the least hint of tiring. To do so, as I did, was slightly transgressive and therefore potentially humorous in itself, and this was sharpened by the disjunction between their image of me as amiable and rather square. Hence the use of profanity to express certain proscribed phenomena was doubly unexpected in my case. Now of course I once again was not doing this with very well thought-out intentions. What I was doing was effectively saying “ouch!” (not literally but this is a part of what I conveyed) in humorous way that protected or softened the very genuine and humorless “ouch!” I would otherwise have conveyed. In other words, I was saying “take it easy,” and so on, in the one way I surmised would be well-received. By contrast to literally say “ouch” or anything conveying “take it easy” in a serious, non-humorous way is indeed socially unacceptable and something one would want to save only for a sort of emergency circumstance; before taking the nuclear option of quitting a fight, one would hope that others in the gym would intervene.

And more generally, it is no accident that often (not always) very warm feelings followed an exchange of blows, especially where the exchange was roughly equal; the spectacle of two boxers embracing after a fight should not be misinterpreted as an empty gesture of politeness. This in itself is a sign that something inherent in the structure of agonism that disperses false views of the other like a mist. There is a locution in boxing
according to which a fight will “answer a lot of questions” about a fighter, which is a recognition that the contest is necessarily *disclosive*. It reveals. And it can have the effect of dispersing fear of one’s opponent, especially. Getting a more realistic image of one’s opponent through agonism can help to undermine *ressentiment*, which as we have seen involves constructing a false image of one’s adversary. And as I can attest, even a lost contest often leaves one not with a feeling of bitterness but actually with a certain feeling of fearlessness – even having been bested, one actually feels *more* equalized with one’s adversary than before: one asks “is that the worst he can do?”

To see how these things function theoretically and at a political level, let us take first the structure of agonism itself.

**Ressentiment and the Structure of Agonism**

In spite of the fact that Brown eschews what she calls a “therapeutic” approach, versus the “political” one she favors, we do not think the approach we propose here is in any sense willowy or therapeutic in the manner derided by Brown. What Brown calls for is not the erasure of wounded identity involved in *ressentiment* (and neither is it the perpetuation of such identity), but it is a shift in identity such that every “I am” involves a “wanting to be.” In a way this follows from her indictment of liberalism; Brown wants to expand on the “promises of individualistic liberty” by emphasizing an open-ended identity of possibility. Brown wants to open up new paths for *ressentiment* groups. I do not disagree with this approach. What I suggest alongside it is that participation in

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120 Id., 400
agonism involves a self-disclosure that the agonistic contests tends to affirm: as I point out even in the case of a lost fight, one tends to emerge from it feeling a certain self-efficacy and pride for having “hung in there.” And as to one’s opponent, the agonistic contest tends to deflate malevolent caricatures. This is so, I hasten to add, partly because the structure of agonism precludes either side from being totally crushed under foot. In the boxing context, sparring is (typically) stopped when it gets out of hand (though this is a matter of discretion) and in an official fight, the corner would throw in the towel before too long. Likewise, agonism assumes the presence of rules designed to protect democratic participants, rather than a total free-for-all, which would be mere political antagonism.

Now, to articulate this theoretically in Nietzschean perspective recall that Nietzsche blames the so-called “slave revolt in morality” on *ressentiment*,\(^\text{121}\) which “gives birth to values” that commit “an imaginary revenge” of the weak against the strong. In his view, morality is the spiritual revenge of the weak against the noble, and “the venomous eye of *ressentiment*” comes to see the “’good’ man of the other [i.e., noble] morality, precisely the noble, powerful man, the ruler” as “evil.”\(^\text{122}\) In opposition to this construction, the man of *ressentiment* emerges himself, strictly in opposition to the “evil” other, as “a ‘good one.’”\(^\text{123}\) Obviously the man of *ressentiment* is ill-suited for participation in deliberation, constituting himself in total opposition to his political enemies. By contrast, the quality of nobility (the antithesis of *ressentiment*) permits

\(^{121}\) Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, I.10, p. 36
\(^{122}\) Id., I.11, p. 40.
\(^{123}\) Id., I.10, p. 39.
agonistic as well as deliberative respect, for as Nietzsche observes: “How much reverence has a noble man for his enemies!—and such reverence is a bridge to love—For he desires his enemy for himself, as his mark of distinction; he can endure no other enemy than one in whom there is nothing to despise and very much to honor!”

Now besides sounding promising for democratic discourse, let us observe how ubiquitous it is in literally agonistic contexts such as boxing. To put it crudely: no boxer wants to win a fight against a lousy opponent. To face someone flagrantly beneath your skill level not only robs the fight of its excitement and hence one’s motive for training, but is potentially dishonorable: facing a weaker opponent suggests one is afraid to fight someone better, and while the victory brings no rewards, a loss is potentially shameful. Hence, the “noble” attitude carries with it a sense of confidence and security sufficient to cause one to desire a strong opponent, even an opponent stronger than oneself. It goes without saying that respect accompanies the desire for a strong opponent.

But how to replace this ressentiment attitude with one of nobility? Are the strong meant “to be nurses or physicians” to the “sick” men of ressentiment? Nietzsche rejects such an approach on behalf of the interest of the healthy in not stooping to the level of the sick and becoming “infected” thereby. But there are other reasons to reject this approach. Wendy Brown has pointed out that “practice[s] that reiterate[] the existence of an identity whose present past is one of insistently undredeemable injury” is

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124 Id., I.10, p. 39 (emphasis original).
125 Id., III.14, p. 124.
involved in an “economy of avenging and at the same time perpetuating its hurt.” For that reason, political approaches that might involve condescending measures toward marginalized groups or require committing an act of revenge against the “strong” (reparations for example), really serve to bolster the attitude of ressentiment and perpetuate existing disparities of power.

The answer is in Nietzsche’s Homer’s Contest, wherein he considers how the Greeks could feel “envy” not secretly or shamefully as the man of ressentiment does, but openly and as a spur to action. In doing so, he distinguishes between the “two goddesses Eris.” For the Greeks “the predicates ‘resentment’ and ‘envy’ fit only to the essence of the bad Eris,” whereas the good Eris is responsible when the one “who lacks property looks upon another who is rich, [and] thus he hurries to sow in a similar way…neighbor competes with neighbor, he strives for prosperity.” The Greeks on Nietzsche’s account distinguished between two forms of envy, one corresponding to ressentiment, another involved in agonism and contestation. And the latter is distinguished by openness and self-disclosure, for “every gift must unfold itself in fighting.” The “kernel of the Hellenic contest-idea” is that “it abhors solitary mastery and fears its dangers; it requires as a means of protection against the genius – a second genius.”

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127 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” in Prefaces to Unwritten Works, Michael W. Grenke ed. (South Bend: St. Augustines Press, 2005) p. 84.
128 Id., pp. 84-85.
129 Id., p. 89.
130 Id., p. 89.
Political Correctness and Ressentiment

But how is this open contestation to take place in our politics when there is a strong countervailing force in political correctness? I used the example of my slightly transgressive profanity in boxing as an analogy here: there, it was “incorrect” to acknowledge pain, exhaustion, and such-like phenomena, yet my doing so through humor actually functioned to facilitate a kind of basic intimacy or warmth. Because it was self-deprecating, it also functioned as an admission of weakness, which had a humanizing function vis-à-vis my relationship with Chris: I was simultaneously indicating a moment of weakness while earning respect for enduring it (and for admitting it in a way that signaled I was unashamed by it), even as I was more importantly implying Chris’s superiority in the ring and my respect for him (“Thanks for beating me up a little bit!” I’d said).

To give a sense of how this could function in political discourse, let me invoke Slavoj Zizek’s notion of “minimal obscenity,” according to which “shared obscene jokes function[] not as a means of excluding the others who [are] not ‘in’, but as the means of their inclusion, of establishing a minimal symbolic pact.”131 The basic idea is that institutions can only function smoothly in the existence of, and actually assume, a kind of anti-institutional transgression. A rough image of this would be the omnipresence of profanity in the military, an otherwise highly authoritarian structure. For Zizek, such transgression or “obscenity” greases the social wheels – it makes genuine human contact

possible. A typical Zizekian example, remembered from his time in the military in Communist Yugoslavia, would have a passing soldier casually making a derogatory reference to Zizek’s mother; Zizek promptly replied in kind regarding the soldier’s sister.132 Fully acknowledging the basic sexism of the jokes in that exchange, Zizek nonetheless maintains that it functioned to establish a basically friendly relationship, an “actual solidarity” established by an exchange of obscenities, which “soon lost its openly obscene or ironic character and became formalized: after only a couple of weeks, the two of us no longer bothered with the whole sentence; in the morning, when we saw each other, he just nodded and said ‘Mother!’, to which I simply responded ‘Sister!’.”133 To give another example, Zizek recounts how at a book signing he was approached by two black readers; he signed the books, “unable to resist” the most outrageous and flagrantly racist remark: “I don’t know which one [i.e., which book] is for whom, you know…you look all the same – [and] they embraced me!” Zizek admires the citizens of Sarajevo for having “daringly mobilized,” during the siege of that city, “all the cliché’s about the ‘stupid Bosnians’ which were commonplace in Yugoslavia, fully identifying with them,” and believes it stands for the proposition that “the path of true solidarity leads through direct confrontation with the obscene racist fantasies which circulated in the symbolic space of Bosnia, through playful identification with them, not through the denial of these obscenities because they do not represent people.”134

132 Id.
133 Id.
Now of course neither we nor Zizek are calling for a discourse replete with insult and obscenity, which would surely do no more than make matters worse. As he admits:

“I’m well aware this doesn’t mean we should just walk around and humiliate each other – it’s a great art how to do it. I’m just saying that’s my hypothesis: without such a tiny exchange of friendly obscenities, you don’t have a real contact with another. It remains this cold respect, and so on. We need this to establish real contact. This is what is lacking for me in political correctness.”¹³⁵

Let us hasten to point out that we would not necessarily endorse Zizek’s own execution of this playfulness – typically a rather outrageous and somehow rather charming obscenity, usually a racist joke – at least not without extreme care. Even if we are charmed by the warmth of Zizek’s affect, the fact that he has given offense fairly regularly suggests that this is a dangerous procedure even for agonism. But nevertheless, Zizek is on to something. Moreover, we have to admit that political correctness carries disturbing implications for the perpetuation of ressentiment, repressing aggressive impulses as it does. Ressentiment can be diminished through “the public expression of opinions,”¹³⁶ in Scheler’s view, but political correctness serves to inhibit this and instead leads to the deliberative vice of “insincerity,” according to Timur Kuran.¹³⁷

Heeding John Lombardini’s call for “civic laughter” as a way of promoting agonistic respect,¹³⁸ we would suggest a variation on Zizek’s notion of obscenity to address ressentiment. What I think made the difference in my relationship with Chris was that the self-disclosing (and slightly transgressive) humor I engaged in was self-

¹³⁵ Interview with Zizek, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dNbWGaaxWM, at 00:09:05.
¹³⁶ Scheler, Ressentiment, p. 42.
¹³⁷ Kuran, “Insincere Deliberation and Democratic Failure,” p. 536
¹³⁸ Lombardini, “Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor,”
deprecating. Studies have certainly shown the promise of self-deprecating humor in politics.\textsuperscript{139} According to one, when Senator Barbara Mikulski was subjected to “a lot of slander” as a single (unmarried) woman during campaign, she seized the opportunity to joke with a male constituent: “Hey Calvin, give me a call after the election. I won’t be so busy then.”\textsuperscript{140}

As I pointed out above, the use of self-deprecating humor allowed me to express my own exhaustion (feelings redounding to my weakness, essentially) in a humorous way that did not involve capitulation. He then could see, repeatedly, the very obviously discontinuity between the image he had projected onto me and the person I actually was. And the silent implication of my jokes was that he was the one causing me pain, that Chris was superior, i.e., worthy of respect. But I also retained enough respect myself that his view of me did not shift to outright contempt. For it is in the nature of agonism that, to use the expression of the Ephesians quoted by Nietzsche, “[a]mong us no one should be the best: but if someone is it, then let him be elsewhere and with others,” because, as Nietzsche points out, if one were the best, “thereby the contest would be exhausted.”\textsuperscript{141}

Bacon makes the point (which I believe derives from Aristotle but haven’t been able to trace it) that:

\textsuperscript{141} Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest”, p. 88.
“[t]hose that have joined with their honor great travails…are less subject to envy. For men think that they earn their honors hardly…Wherefore you shall observe that the more deep and sober sort of politic persons, in their greatness, are ever bemoaning themselves, what a life they lead; chanting quanta patimur [how great things do we suffer!]. Not that they feel it so, but only to abate the edge of envy.”\textsuperscript{142}

Hence the use of obscenity in the boxing anecdote differs from Zizek’s in that it is self-directed and really aimed at dampening ressentiment envy. Zizek’s obscenities are meant, it seems to me, as a playful attack on the other that defuses or relieves tension arising from the possibility of real attack on the other, and demonstrating that one’s intentions are precisely not aggressive – but in solidarity. This is a great deal, but is also risky as a strategy for initiating political discourse, given the possibility of miscommunication and real offense. What I am suggesting is a kind of humorous quanta patimur along Bacon’s lines, profane or no, that acknowledges the limitations of political actors and, as a result, “abates the edge of envy” and ressentiment felt by others in the polity.

If the problem of political narcissists is that they rate themselves too highly, and the problem with ressentiment is one whereby political actors rate each other too low – indeed, with outright hostility; and if a certain kind of listening (receiving) is the cure for narcissism, perhaps a certain kind of disclosure (putting forth) is what can help us address ressentiment. As to the outcome of such anti-ressentiment measures, in concrete terms, I have in mind something like the by-now almost mythologized relationship between President Reagan and House Speaker Tip O’Neill: “Mr. President, welcome to the room

\textsuperscript{142} Francis Bacon, “Of Envy,” p. 85.
where we plot against you,” said an aide to O’Neill. “Oh, no, not after 6,” Reagan replied. “The speaker says that here in Washington we’re all friends after 6.” Evidently the agonistic respect that existed between Reagon and O’Neill was facilitated by story-telling: “It’s Tip’s birthday, and we had a good time telling stories – Irish stories,” recalled Reagan of a 3-hour lunch with O’Neill, of whom he confided to his diary that “[Tip] can really like you personally and be a friend while politically trying to beat your head in.” There is perhaps no better expression of agonistic respect, among “equal” participants in the democratic political contest, than that.

**Conclusion**

Having suggested this much to attend to the obstacle of *ressentiment*, and suggested that agonism is an intermediate step between debate and deliberation, we now have to show how we might address the primary difference between agonism and deliberation. For as Mouffe points out, participants in agonistic democracy may adhere to liberal-democratic principles, but they vigorously “disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles.” If we are ever to achieve consensus on their meaning and implementation, we must have some principles of *interpretation*. We do not believe, as Mouffe does, that liberal democratic “ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations,” at least not so many that

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144 Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 102.
145 Id., p. 102.
any “consensus [we achieve] is bound to be a ‘conflictual consensus.’”146 Neither do we purport to supply principles of interpretation along the lines of Kant’s transcendental logic, the principle would contain the rule of its own application, obviating the need for judgment.

Still, we need a way of interpreting liberal-democratic principles that moves us closer to the consensus aimed at by deliberation, and away from the permanent contestation of agonism. In particular, we need interpretative principles that can ensure we do not marginalize the very political minorities we have sought to welcome more fully into democratic discourse. We therefore turn in the next chapter to the Habermas-Gadamer debate to consider first the kind of socially critical purchase that hermeneutics can give to deliberative participants. And in the following chapter, we sketch out some hermeneutical approaches drawn from Leo Strauss and from the discipline of psychoanalysis, to see whether we can locate some interpretive principles – analogous to canons of construction in the legal context – that would lessen antagonism over the meaning and implementation of democratic goals, and ensure that minority voices are kept within the discourse

146 Id., p. 103.
4. Between Empathy and Interpretation: Psychoanalysis and Political Hermeneutics as Models of Dialogue

Introduction

Even if Mouffe is wrong and we need not resign ourselves to “inevitably disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of [our liberal democratic ethico-political] principles,”¹ it is obvious from the state of political discourse that deliberative democrats need a better approach toward resolving such disagreement. Indeed, it would be easy to conclude, from mere exasperation and not through some insight into the nature of things, that our “principles can only exist through many and different conflicting interpretations.”² For want of such an approach, it is no wonder that the deliberative endeavor seems agonistic and antagonistic to so many. But if politics can seem like an “agon of interpretations,” perhaps this is not due merely to the inevitable plurality of perspectives with which any deliberation is likely to begin. Perhaps, just as much as the obstacles to deliberation discussed in earlier chapters, interpretation, too, is or can be driven by psychological phenomena. Even granting that neurosis could lead to a consistency of views in deliberating citizens (and some neuroses, such as the borderline or bipolar disorders, are notorious for their inconsistency), how do we ever hope to reach consensus with fellow citizens when we do not understand the basis for their views? Is it enough to leave it at the reasons they explicitly give? And, particularly in situations of disagreement, how can we hope to persuade citizens to reinterpret political phenomena in

¹ Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, p. 102
² Id., p. 103.
the absence of a much deeper understanding of their motives. To address these things, this chapter will argue, deliberative theory needs a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

To indicate the beginnings of what we intend, let us consider a story told by Suzanne Hommel, the psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, from her analysis with Lacan: for years, Hommel relates, she was troubled by a recurring dream. Each night she awoke at 5AM – the hour, she said, when the Gestapo had burst into her home during the war. Hearing this, Lacan leapt up from his chair, approached her, and with his hand he caressed Mme. Hommel on the cheek. The caress was, according to Hommel, a “very tender gesture…an extraordinarily tender gesture” – transforming “Gestapo” into “geste à peau” (literally, a gesture of the skin). “It didn’t diminish the pain,” she said, “but it made it something else.” And “the proof [is] now, 40 years later, when I recall that gesture, I can still feel it on my cheek.” “It was,” she said “a gesture as well which was an appeal to humanity.”

This story, hermeneutical to the core, begins to show, I think, how one’s views may be revised through an interpretive encounter with another, here in the analytic setting but no less in the political. And crucially, it shows that the interpretation may be premised on elements as to which we are scarcely conscious or entirely unaware. For here, “Lacan taught that the expression of any signifier,” – “Gestapo,” and its clearly

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negative associations for Hommel in this case – “immediately evokes other signifiers, which may slide under the bar of conscious awareness but can emerge in subsequent dialogue.”\(^5\) Could Hommel’s nightmares of the Gestapo have, therefore, “express[ed] her longing for the tenderness she found in Lacan’s surprising gesture,”\(^6\) the transformative geste à peau? Whatever the precise theoretical explanation for Hommel’s receptiveness to this gesture, the important point is its transformative character – not in the sense of totally supplanting Hommel’s interpretation of “Gestapo,” but of adding to it, surely. And moreover, the interpretive “work” of the analyst occurred at the level of depth interpretation, beneath the level of ordinary discourse. It looked beneath Hommel’s explicit views for her motives, and on that basis, invited her to an alternate interpretation. This is of course not to say that her fear of the Gestapo no longer existed and was replaced by sympathetic feelings, or that, in an analogous political setting, we could hope to reconcile longtime opponents once and for all in this way. Nevertheless, it made conscious a new interpretation, adding to Hommel’s complex set of associations arising from her experience with the Gestapo, and this made possible something new. The moment of the geste à peau itself, it almost goes without saying, was a moment of consensus between analyst and patient.

This raises a crucial problem for extant theories of deliberation, most of which assume total “political sincerity” among participants in deliberation – “civic integrity” as Gutmann and Thompson otherwise put it, “consistency in speech.” All deliberative

\(^5\) Id., p. 74.
\(^6\) Id.
theories assume this because deliberation is meant to replace bargaining, with its attendant deceptions and tactics. Deliberation is meant to be an oasis of honest speech. Such theories therefore “expect citizens and officials to espouse their moral positions independently of the circumstances in which they speak,” and of course they mean this (as do virtually all deliberative theorists) to preclude strategic speech, i.e., lying or “hold[ing] [a] position for…reasons of political advantage.”7 (A slight deviation here is Elster, who recognized the “civilizing force of hypocrisy”8 but does so for the same reasons – that the public character of deliberation tends to force arguments in the direction of public-spiritedness to the detriment of naked factional interest.) For speech premised on deception is a political act involving the use of power, since deception is undoubtedly a tool of power. Deliberation, by contrast, has been put forth as a setting wherein “the force of the better argument” is to prevail. That is the reason for Habermas’s well-known distinction between “communicative action” and “strategic action”: for “to the degree that interactions cannot be coordinated through achieving understanding,” i.e., wherever the aim of speech is not deliberative, “the only alternative that remains is force exercised by one against others (in a more or less refined, more or less latent manner). The typological distinction between communicative and strategic action says nothing else than this.”9 Hence according to Habermas, for deliberation to transpire, there must be

7 Gutmann and Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement, p. 81.
8 Elster, “Deliberation and Constitution Making,” p. 111
“mutual trust in subjective sincerity.” And we may reject speech as insincere when we suspect it “is not in agreement with…the speaker’s own world of subjective experiences.”

But if our subjective experience is such as we do not care to admit publicly or, worse, is something we are totally unaware of, how is deliberative sincerity even possible? The problem goes even deeper than the one Timur Kuran is concerned with, so-called “preference falsification” or “insincere speech,” whereby “social pressures suppress thoughts whose expression would be unwelcome” and we are left with deliberation “afflicted by insincerity.” Kuran is rightly concerned with “obstacles to sincere dialogue” arising essentially from the public shaming of certain political positions and consequent embarrassment among citizens. Observing, not coincidentally, that the “crux of the Gutmann-Thompson enterprise lies in their interpretations of these principles [i.e., the substantive political principles of “basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity”],” interpretations that according to Kuran “essentially suit the policy goals of today’s left-liberal elites,” Kuran argues that Gutmann and Thompson exacerbate the problem of insincere deliberation by delegitimizing a range of political views. Kuran’s basic concern is insincere deliberation arising from conscious motives,

11 Id. (emphasis added).
14 Id., p. 539 (emphasis added).
among those who feel excluded from political discourse. For Kuran, these include, for example, citizens who oppose “race-conscious” policies like affirmative action or bilingual education for immigrants, and who instead favor a vision of immigration as a “melting pot.”

But are there not just as many citizens, on all sides, whose political views arise from an unconscious “world of subjective experience,” one as to which they have little insight? As Ryfe has noted, a number of “studies…show that the mere presence of a symbol…can trigger reflexive, largely unconscious judgments.”\(^\text{15}\) And while the “mechanism of this process is in some dispute,” nevertheless “judgments based on information shortcuts that mobilize scripts…allow groups to reach unconscious rather than deliberate judgments.”\(^\text{16}\)

We need look no further than the recent controversy surrounding the removal of the Confederate flag from South Carolina’s Capitol. In the wake of the evidently racially charged murder of nine black citizens in a Charleston church, there was a vigorous debate over what the flag “represents,” i.e., the proper interpretation to be given to the flag. One poll suggested the nation was almost evenly split on the question whether the flag was “more a symbol of Southern pride than…a symbol of racism,” with 57% of respondents favoring the former position.\(^\text{17}\) No doubt there were some Southerners supporting maintenance of the flag from more or less racist motives, in which case one might

\(^{16}\) Id., p. 56.
conclude that these views were (through political correctness) properly excluded from the debate as illegitimate, though in light of the last chapter I still maintain that something must be done with even these “illegitimate” feelings and that political correctness is not a benign influence on discourse. But suppose that, for other Southerners, their subjective experience involved not so much an outright racism but was one of “Southern pride,” all in spite of the obvious historical discontinuity with the Confederacy (the flag having been revived only recently, in 1961, as a symbolically defiant act of resistance to desegregation). Might there not be reasons, of which they are partially or wholly unaware, for their conscious feelings of Southern pride in what they deem to be a symbol of the South? And might not even contemporary Southern racism, such as it is, be animated by similarly unaccounted for motives? I would certainly propose ressentiment against some an image of “liberal elites,” those effete city folk, as one possible motive for the need to construct some image of Southern identity, which has a curiously antithetical character vis-à-vis non-Southerners. That is to say, I do not think it is accidental that Southern identity is constructed in such an emphatically oppositional way to all things non-Southern (a theme constantly repeated in contemporary country music) – in my view, over and above the supposedly necessary “otherness” that many theorists (Schmitt, Derrida, Connolly, to name a few) think is constitutive of identity. Could this not be a sign of ressentiment? Or, alternatively, the need for Southern pride and attraction to symbols of the Confederacy could be construed as a form of narcissism corresponding to

Kohut’s idealized parent imago, essentially the need to idealize and simultaneously attach oneself to a “perfect” other. As Kohut gave voice to this impulse, and as many Southerners probably believe of their Southern heritage, “You are perfect, but I am part of you.”

Of course the psychological phenomena underlying our views do not just carry negative implications for politics. Many psychic constellations carry great promise and the possibility of greater consensus. Indeed, the argument of this chapter is that unconscious motives and other psychic factors should be recognized regardless of their potential promise or the problems they pose, because to neglect them is to fail to understand one’s interlocutor. Lapses in self-understanding can prevent mutual understanding unless our interlocutor is sufficiently attentive to us and willing to look for the meaning beneath our words.

Consider Sadat’s pathbreaking visit to the Knesset in 1977. Interestingly, Sadat said in his address to the Knesset “that the main purpose of his trip was to break down the psychological barrier that prevented peaceful resolution of the conflict.” As Maoz and Astorino observe, “[f]or a political leader to admit that psychological factors shape and drive an international conflict is not a common occurrence.” Perhaps Sadat was trying to downplay the substantive disagreements that existed between the two sides by suggesting in this way that the conflict was primarily psychological and hence formal.

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19 Kohut, *Analysis of the Self*, p. 27.
21 Id.
Then again he did state that “70% of the problem in the Middle East conflict is psychological”\textsuperscript{22} and more than once expressed hopes of “break[ing] through the ‘psychological barriers’” that existed between the Arabs and Israelis with his visit.\textsuperscript{23}

Particularly interesting is the moment of Sadat’s surprise announcement of his willingness to come to Israel to talk peace. In a speech to the Egyptian parliament, Sadat laid his prepared text aside and said, “br[eaking] the ultimate Arab taboo,” that he was willing to go anywhere, even to Israel, and to the Knesset itself in order to negotiate peace. “The idea that Sadat would negotiate directly with Israel was so unthinkable [that] the audience applauded without realizing what he had said.”\textsuperscript{24} According to Mustafa Khalil, a member of Egypt’s parliament at the time, “everyone was applauding Sadat – even Yassir Arafat was clapping; I know because he was sitting next to me.”\textsuperscript{25}

In my view, it is no exercise in “wild analysis”\textsuperscript{26} to suggest that the applause may have been more than pro forma or the result of shock at Sadat’s suggestion of direct talks with Israel but was, to the contrary, the spontaneous surfacing of generally unconscious feelings \textit{welcoming} Sadat’s initiative. If anything, the accompanying surprise would have defused conscious defenses against such anxieties. The existence in that period of an “ultimate Arab taboo” against recognition or negotiation with Israel is not in dispute.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{The 50 Years War: Israel and the Arabs – Part 2}, 00:31:00-00:31:34 (PBS Video, 2000), available at \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtLorIXCcz4}.
\textsuperscript{25} Id.
Other commentators characterize it this way, referring to an “Arab taboo against sitting at the table with Israel,” and a “strong Arab taboo against recognizing Israel or talking to the enemy,” and indeed such a taboo would eventually be enforced by Sadat’s assassin. Yet the “principal characteristic of the psychological constellation” of taboo is the “subject’s ambivalent attitude towards a single object, or rather towards one act in connection with that object.” As in Freud’s “typical case of ‘touching phobia,’” the taboo does not arise without a “strong desire to touch” – it is only in the presence of desire that the taboo (the “external prohibition”) becomes necessary in the first place.

One might object that the taboo against negotiation with Israel differs from the Freudian taboo in the strict sense because it was not characterized by “prohibitions [that] lack any assignable motive.” One could object that in this case, and unlike the touching phobia, there was no original desire for relations with Israel that was then later prohibited (unless one wishes to postulate some general human inclination to friendship or peace among nations). Thus this “Arab taboo” originated in genuine conflict and was premised on real antagonism, not on some need to suppress hidden instincts. Yet Sadat himself, at least, saw the taboo as blocking an underlying desire for contact, commenting that “[w]e had been accustomed (and a whole generation had been brought up to regard Israel as taboo –

30 Id., p. 37.
31 Id.
as an entity whose emotional associations simply prevented anyone from approaching it."\(^{32}\)

If we regard the curious spectacle accompanying Sadat’s announcement – thundering applause at the breaking of a taboo – as being prompted by unconscious motives, then we have hit upon an instance where “the subject does not recognize the intentions which guided his expressive activity.”\(^{33}\) We have an example, to use Habermas’s words, of “systematically distorted communication.”\(^{34}\) Here, at least one of “three levels of communication” – the “physical expression” (applause)\(^{35}\) – is in an unintentional contradiction with the prevailing linguistic discourse (the discourse reaffirming the taboo against negotiating with Israel). As a result, according to Habermas, the language game was “deformed.”\(^{36}\) And on the basis of such a deformed language game, genuine communication cannot take place. Instead, “[p]seudo-communication generates a system of misunderstandings” and are disguised by the “appearance of a false consensus.”\(^{37}\) A possible ambivalence of the Arab mind with regard to Israel was brought to the surface in this moment. Indeed, it reads very much as an intolerable ambivalence, repressed by the punishing Arab Superego, i.e., Sadat’s assassin. Even if such an ambivalence, had it been discussed more openly, would not have made a difference in Arab initiatives or, e.g., the Egyptian negotiating position, still


\(^{34}\) Id.

\(^{35}\) Id., p. 195

\(^{36}\) Id.

\(^{37}\) Id., p. 191
it would have better enabled deliberation to take place, not only between the two sides
but amongst their respective citizenries. For one thing, the slightest hint of Arab desire
for contact could be imagined to have dampened tendencies to intransigence or
conservatism among Israelis, which in turn might have softened Arab views of Israel. In
any event, a misunderstanding of this kind cannot have helped talks between the two
sides, who cannot be so far apart from each other as they at times have believed.

But this is an extreme case and perhaps false consensus is not so pathological in
routine politics. Perhaps we could afford to be sanguine about false consensus if we lived
in a better ordered polity; in such paradise, one could argue that we needn’t pierce the
veil of distorted speech and instead should let the subject’s true intentions go
undiscovered, in effect letting sleeping dogs lie. But given the situation in which we find
ourselves, we argue that the deliberative endeavor needs to take account of distorted
communication as an obstacle to its aims. In preceding chapters we sought to identify
certain psychological obstacles to deliberation which have pathologized political
judgment. We understood these obstacles – narcissism and ressentiment – to arise largely
from a problematic self-construal, and argued that these were in need of political
interventions informed in part by psychoanalysis. Here, we make the more general claim
that deliberation could benefit from proceeding on the model of psychoanalysis, and that,
to do so, means that deliberative theory must become more self-consciously
hermeneutical in its approach. For psychoanalysis is, at its core, an interpretive
endeavor, and essentially a hermeneutic “science.” As Habermas correctly observes, the
“aim of analytical interpretation, seen hermeneutically, consists of the clarification of the
incomprehensible meaning of symptomatic expressions.”38 And since identity is largely interpretive,39 narcissism and ressentiment, too, are in need of an intervention that is hermeneutical in character. Deliberation needs “depth hermeneutics,” a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to invoke Ricoeur’s phrase once more,”40 and may find a ready model for this in psychoanalysis.

But in calling for a more generally interpretive, more generally hermeneutical approach to deliberation, while at the same time adverting to the model of psychoanalysis as a model, we face a bit of a difficulty: for, as we shall see, according to Gadamer hermeneutics involves primarily the rejection of any attempt to understand the author or interlocutor, in favor of an understanding of the text. Hence it is because hermeneutics is “concerned not with individuality and what it thinks but with the truth of what is said, [that] a text is not understood as a mere expression of life but is taken seriously in its claim to truth.”41 Do we not face a problem then when the chief tool of psychoanalysis is “vicarious introspection,”42 i.e., the empathy of analyst for patient? Kohut spoke so much of empathy that his critics even charged him with the claim that “empathy cures,” a

38 Id., p. 192.
40 Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy, p. 32. In commenting on the “three exercises of suspicion” undertaken by Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, Ricoeur finds the “intention they had in common…the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false consciousness.’” Hence the hermeneutics of suspicion searches for “truth as lying.” Id., p. 33.
41 Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 296.
claim Kohut denies but which nonetheless indicates the prominent role of empathy in his thought and psychoanalysis generally. That is why many of the calls for a merger of psychoanalysis and hermeneutics are extremely naïve: Gadamer explicitly rejects the aim of romantic hermeneutics which was to achieve an empathic understanding of the author. For Gadamer, the goal of empathizing with the author, as with the psychoanalytic patient, is not viable. Therefore, if we take Gadamer’s claims seriously, is not any attempt to call for a psychoanalytically informed mode of deliberation futile to begin with? For in calling for a psychanalytically informed approach to deliberation, are we not attempting to understand the “person” (an impossibility) rather than the “text” (his deliberative claims)?

Of course Gadamer’s claims are not the last word, nor is he the only serious contemporary hermeneuticist, though it must be said that today one could not think seriously about interpretation without engaging with Gadamer. But let us not encumber ourselves with polemics. Whatever may be said against Gadamer, let us grant provisionally that he is correct that an understanding of the author is not possible and hence a truly empathic understanding of our deliberative interlocutors is likewise futile. Is it not true nonetheless that the citizen, like the patient in analysis – and unlike the author or the text – may learn something about himself through the deliberative encounter? Could a psychoanalytically informed approach to deliberation not “transform[] character structures in ways that allow individuals to engage in discourse
that is not ‘distorted’ by self-defeating psychodynamics?"\(^\text{43}\) Mark Warren agrees with Habermas that “[d]iscursive democracy…will of necessity involve a therapeutic dimension,”\(^\text{44}\) though he, too, does not add much detail as to how this will work. We maintain that, even if the aim of empathy is impossible – and, perhaps, a somewhat distorting regulative ideal – the attempt to understand the other as closely as possible, even if always woefully incomplete from the perspective of the person trying to understand, can actually result in learning on the part of the one who is incompletely understood. That is to say, the interpreter or analyst may never completely understand the text or patient, but the attempt to understand may reveal something unknown to the patient about himself. Did not Lacan’s geste à peau to Mme. Hommel reveal something new to her, when her psyche prior to this encounter had been dominated by nightmares of an intruding Gestapo? Might not Sadat’s breaking of the “Arab taboo” have brought to the surface some complex and discomforting feelings toward Israel? And if Gadamer is correct that the “real meaning of a text…does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience” and is therefore “not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter,” i.e., that “the meaning of a text goes beyond its author”\(^\text{45}\)—is this not necessarily an invitation to depth hermeneutics rather than an injunction against it? Even, therefore, if neither the analyst nor the deliberative participant may understand their interlocutors with perfect empathy,

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\(^{44}\) Id.

\(^{45}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 296.
nevertheless their interpretations may reveal something about the character of their interlocutors, previously unknown to them. As I have tried to suggest, taking the examples of narcissism and ressentiment, if these phenomena arise from a problematic self-construal, they are also amenable to psychoanalytically informed interventions that affect that construal – for example, the narcissist whose true self is disclosed, (imperfectly) understood, and mirrored (with occasional lapses) by the analyst is likely to develop a more stable sense of self that displaces the problematic grandiose self; likewise, the man of ressentiment, participating in a certain kind of agonistic contest and the unavoidable self-disclosure involved therein, is likely to see the flaws in the hated, once-“superior” other as well as realize his own strength vis-à-vis such an other, diminishing the envy at the root of ressentiment. That is to say, if identity or the self is – like the text – something that goes beyond the meaning that we ourselves give to it, then on Gadamer’s own terms we are necessarily “understanding not just that person (his ‘psychology,’ for instance)”\(^46\) by seeking to go beneath the surface of the text and thus to engage in “depth hermeneutics” – in fact, we are doing no less than what Gadamer believes occurs when we interpret in any case.

In what follows, therefore, we first consider the rather limited engagement of the literature on deliberative democracy with hermeneutics, agreeing with scholars who have called for a more self-consciously hermeneutical approach; then, we look at Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics in the context of the Gadamer-Habermas debate. We do so

\(^46\)Id., p. xvi.
because this allows us to see the hermeneutical objections to an interpretive approach that encompasses “empathic understanding,” while letting us assess the rejoinder from Habermas who, while partially accepting Gadamer’s account, actually offers psychoanalysis as an approach that permits critical purchase in social theory. Finally, we elaborate in what sense we intend psychoanalysis as a depth-hermeneutical approach to deliberation. In doing so, we to some degree align ourselves with Habermas’s early call for a psychoanalytic element to politics, one that he never developed however. And we show that, contrary to one scholar’s conception of analysis as a model of agonistic dialogue, the “therapeutic alliance” between patient and analyst – practically the hallmark of psychoanalytic treatment – fits far better within a deliberative approach.

We here propound this model cautiously and with due modesty as to its benefits: for given the dangers Freud notes of “wild” analysis, such an approach runs the risk of exacerbating the separation between deliberative participants, “inspiring a hearty enmity toward the physician”47 and hence toward anyone who clumsily proceeds analytically with his interlocutor. That is why we emphasize in the final section that we are not undertaking to “diagnose” our interlocutors, but to engage in deliberation with them on the basis of greater understanding. Besides, the risk may be worth the rewards; Freud concedes that “a clumsy procedure like this, even if at first it produced an exacerbation of the patient’s condition, led to a recovery in the end.”48 Misunderstanding, though risky, could well lead to enhanced understanding at a later stage of deliberation. As Habermas

48 Id.
notes, “[h]ermeneutic understanding begins at the points of interruption.”

It is not that we seek to promote misunderstanding any more than in addressing political narcissism we sought to promote empathic failures, but do we think that such failures, if premised on goodwill, are potentially fruitful and in any event can hardly be worse than a status quo already characterized by polarization and stagnation.

**Hermeneutics and Deliberative Theory**

But what, exactly, do we mean by “hermeneutics”? We mean it in the broad sense of “the study of the understanding of the works of man,” or as Schleiermacher has it, “the art of understanding particularly the written discourse of another person correctly.” The word has Greek roots, of course, and is to be found in the title of Aristotle’s work *On Interpretation* (peri hermeneias). Hermeneutics has been associated with a number of fields, including “biblical exegesis,” philological methodology, “the science of all linguistic understanding,” the “methodological foundation of [the social sciences],” as a “phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding,” and as “systems of interpretation…used by man to reach the meaning

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behind myths and symbols.”

Strange, whereas the study and application of hermeneutics is omnipresent in certain obvious fields such as literary criticism, there are pockets of neglect among a number of the social sciences, political science among them. “Thee-ah hermeneutics,” recalls a character in a Saul Bellow novel, “[he] says harmoneutics are little sandwiches eaten by musicians during the intermission.”

The quip is meant to poke fun at continental philosophy for its seeming irrelevance to contemporary problems. Within the academy and even the field of political theory, there are many for whom hermeneutics may just as well be a line of snacks for violinists, not the study of interpretation, vital to politics and to democratic deliberation, as this chapter contends. For example, one scholar, commenting on the title of his paper “The Irrelevance of (Straussian) Hermeneutics,” explained that he “reject[s] the idea of a ‘Straussian hermeneutic’ partly because I reject the usefulness of the classic hermeneutic texts – Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and so on,” and stresses that his “claims about the irrelevance of a ‘Straussian hermeneutic’...[are] less important than my comments on the irrelevance of hermeneutics more generally.” This is not to say that there have not been a number of hermeneutical studies by political theorists – for example Roxanne Euben’s wonderful study of

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54 Id., p. 33.
Islamic fundamentalism (one which grapples with the Gadamer-Habermas debate as well) – but rather that a hermeneutical approach is not part of our conscious, everyday approach, as this chapter contends it must be. Thus Michael Gibbons observes the “failure of a substantial segment of political science to take accurate account of the changes that have taken place in interpretive theory and its reformulation of the interpretation of the meaning of social and political action.”58

If the state of scholarship is any indication, the above attitude has been shared at least tacitly by most theorists of deliberative democracy, and in spite of the very striking fact that Habermas, who by his own terms is “one of the first and most vigilant defenders of deliberative democracy,”59 explicitly embraced a hermeneutic approach in attempting to ground his critical theory (even as he expressed reservations about the limits of hermeneutics in a debate with hermeneutics’ leading contemporary proponent). To be sure, there have been political applications of hermeneutics. For example, Roberto Alejandro has called for a “hermeneutic conception of the public sphere” and, inter alia, argued against Lyotard that some form of consensus is possible.60 Neo-Marxists have sought in hermeneutics an alternative to the “immutable laws of history” in their revisions of classical Marxist theory.61 Yet with the exception of Habermas, the field of

59 Interview with Jürgen Habermas (Feb. 1, 2007), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBl6ALNhl8Q
deliberative democracy, especially its American strain, has hardly drawn from hermeneutics, though deliberation obviously requires one to “understand...[the] discourse of another person correctly”\textsuperscript{62} and hermeneutics is exclusively concerned with arriving at such an understanding.

As Derek Walhof rightly observes, “deliberative theorists have paid greater attention to the conditions for deliberation,” yet “what deliberation actually does has remained largely undertheorized; indeed, it seems to be increasingly and strangely neglected.”\textsuperscript{63} Rawls, extolling an “ideal of public reason [that] contains a form of public political deliberation,” is concerned to specify what “institutions” are “necessary for this deliberation to be possible and fruitful,”\textsuperscript{64} but gives us little indication how this is to be carried out – though a number of commentators have seen in Rawls’ “political” turn an implicitly hermeneutical approach.\textsuperscript{65} Gutmann and Thompson complain that deliberation “receives little attention” in “the standard theories of democracy”\textsuperscript{66} but do not engage with hermeneutics either. Yet according to Gadamer, “I moved the idea of conversation to the very center of hermeneutics.”\textsuperscript{67} Indeed, Gadamer is in agreement with Gutmann and Thompson, with Rawls, and with deliberative democrats generally that “[w]e do not need just to hear one another but to listen to one another,” for “[o]nly

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Schleiermacher, \textit{Hermeneutics and Criticism}, p. xx.
\item Rawls, \textit{Political Liberalism}, p. lvii.
\item Gutmann and Thompson, \textit{Democracy and Disagreement}, p. 12.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
when this happens is there understanding.”68 No field of inquiry, therefore, would seem to have greater relevance for deliberative theory than hermeneutics. And assuming that Gadamer was not here just mouthing a platitude, hermeneutics may have a great deal to tell us about how to listen to one another in a way that enables deliberation. Indeed, as Dieter Misgeld writes of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, “hermeneutics implies the outline of a theory of communicative interaction.”69

Fortunately, the rule of silence among deliberative theorists has been interrupted by a handful of recent calls for a hermeneutic approach. Walhof, among them, has called for “further reflection on how dialogue works, on how it does or does not lead toward understanding,”70 advancing Gadamer as the source for a more hermeneutical approach to deliberation. Paul Healy has made a similar point, arguing that “a thoroughgoing dialogical reappropriation is called for if the deliberative proposal [is to] live up to its pluralistic and inclusive intent,”71 a proposal he elsewhere characterizes as a “dialogical reappropriation of the [Habermasian] discourse model” along hermeneutical lines, and one he avows has “been strongly influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.”72 Georgia Warnke, herself a leading scholar on Gadamer as well as

68 Id. Rawls for his part says much the same thing when he says that the ideal of public reason “expresses a willingness to listen to what others have to say and being ready to accept reasonable accommodations or alterations in one’s own view.” Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 253.
deeply immersed in the project of discourse ethics (as, e.g., the English translator of Karl-Otto Apel), unsurprisingly has made perhaps the most cogent call for a hermeneutic approach to deliberation, pointing out that Gutmann and Thompson cannot resolve deliberative disagreement through appeals to supposedly transcendent moral principles because those are subject to further interpretation.73

Now, for us to call for a more hermeneutical approach to deliberation would, in one way, be nonsense, at least to the extent that we think Gadamer’s account is accurate. And this, of course, is because Gadamer presents his own account as ontological, i.e., as the way things are, and hence unavoidable. Gadamer’s “real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”74 For the commentators, as for us, to exhort the field toward (Gadamerian) hermeneutics would be futile and inane; if Gadamer is right, we are already inevitably there. We, however, call for hermeneutics not merely because we think that the consciousness of our inevitable hermeneutic situation can lead to greater understanding – which is the sensible but rather obvious contention of practically every explicator of Gadamer, and one that Habermas agrees with – but for an additional reason: because we agree with Habermas that the “claim that hermeneutics legitimately brings to bear on the absolutism of a general methodology of the empirical sciences…does not relieve it of the business of methodology as such.”75 In other words, even if “a clear polarization exists” between hermeneuticists who (like Schleiermacher, Dilthey and

73 Warnke, “Deliberation and Interpretation”
74 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxv-xxvi.
Emilio Betti) “look to hermeneutics as a general body of methodological principles which underlie interpretation” and hermeneuticists who are “the followers of Heidegger” (preeminently, Gadamer) “who see hermeneutics as a philosophical exploration of the character and requisite conditions for all understanding” – even if this polarization exists today, almost 50 years after Palmer made this observation, this does not mean that there are not points of compatibility. Principally, as we argue here and in the next chapter, we think that Gadamer’s hermeneutical perspective is fully compatible with a psychoanalytically formed approach to deliberation and, moreover, by no means rules out further methodological principles for interpretation. In other words, just because Gadamer has given voice to what “happens to us” in understanding “above our wanting and doing” does not mean that our wanting and doing have no bearing or that we lack agency in the interpretive (and deliberative endeavor). Obviously, if Gadamer is correct about the inevitability of our hermeneutic situation, this fact alone has not prevented understanding to come about more or less frequently. There are still better and worse dialogues, as we see in our everyday experience. Clearly then, a sort of hermeneutic methodology, such as we shall begin to sketch out in the next chapter, is called for, as are all conscious efforts in that direction.

In revisiting the Gadamer-Habermas debate in the next section, we seek to assure ourselves of the viability, i.e., accuracy, of Gadamer’s hermeneutic account. It is significant that a leading proponent of deliberative democracy, one for whom the viability of social criticism is absolutely paramount given his Frankfurt School roots, not only agreed that Gadamer’s hermeneutic account was inevitable but welcomed it as
foundational to his critique of the methodology of the social sciences. Habermas by no means understood hermeneutics as contrary to consensus, as Vattimo and Zabala wrongly suggest when they propound “interpretation as anarchy.”\textsuperscript{76} In fact, Habermas foresaw the opposite problem: he thought that Gadamer’s account of hermeneutics, though largely correct, underemphasized the role of critical reflection vis-à-vis the political traditions in which we find ourselves, and hence potentially led to \textit{too much} consensus, complicating Habermas’s own aim of gaining critical purchase on society. While we share Habermas’s reservations in this regard, we must say that finding ourselves in a situation where consensus seems a distant goal, there is something to be said for an approach that errs in the other direction. (Of course Zizek sees the opposite state of affairs: that, living under neoliberal capitalist conditions, we are already in a situation of near-hopeless conformity. He points out that our cinema and popular culture is replete with gargantuan, Science Fiction-style visions of transformation – even while the tiniest suggestions for change in the capitalist system are regarded as unthinkable or laughed off the street. While very sympathetic to Zizek’s diagnosis of political conformity, I nonetheless persist in the contention that where issues of actual policy are concerned, the rule is disarray.) I will claim therefore that Habermas and Gadamer “need each other” and that their thought is compatible, which shows the limits and the promise of a hermeneutic approach to deliberation.

\textsuperscript{76} Vattimo and Zabala, \textit{Hermeneutic Communism}, p. 75.
On the Viability of Hermeneutics: the Gadamer-Habermas Debate

A. An Overview of Gadamer’s Hermeneutics

Gadamer’s *Truth & Method* was an attempt to clarify “what truth is in the human sciences,” as contrasted with the notion of truth prevalent in the natural sciences, which regards natural phenomena as “objects” to be approached ever more closely by understanding via the “method” of science. It was, as Gadamer constantly insists, no mere exposition of method common to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, nor an elaboration of methodological rules. Its aim was descriptive, a putative exposition of the “conditions in which understanding takes place.” Of course, its purportedly descriptive nature has served to reinforce the confidence those attracted to his account: for how could things be otherwise?

Gadamer’s account of deliberation (“conversation” as he says) is analogous to his description of the way texts are read, related to, and understood—and indeed I would venture that the word “text” for Gadamer could conceivably be extended to encompass to any phenomena requiring interpretation (which is surely part of the reason why Gadamer later recognized that his initial division between human and natural science could not sustain, for did not Kuhn suggest that natural phenomena, too, require interpretation?). There is no text “out there” in the sense of an object to which we may have access if only

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77 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xxiii
78 Id., 285. Eventually, and especially after Kuhn, Gadamer began to realize that truth within natural science might not differ so radically after all. Id., p. 374, n. 25.
79 Id., p. xxv.
80 Id., p. xxvi and 295.
81 Id., p. 295.
we succeed in freeing ourselves from our prejudices; rather the “object of research [is] actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry,” and the text as “an ‘object in itself’ clearly does not exist at all.” Habermas once referred to Gadamer as the philosopher who “urbanize[d] the Heideggerian province,” and one can see why in *Truth and Method*: Gadamer says that “the present work is devoted to this new aspect of the hermeneutical problem,” i.e., to unraveling the implications of Heidegger’s thought for understanding and the human sciences. Thus, for Gadamer, “the idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity…reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms—i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates.” Citing Aristotle, Gadamer declares that “what makes classical ethics superior to modern moral philosophy,”—and here one should read ‘Kant,’ Gadamer’s foil throughout *Truth and Method*—“is that it grounds the transition from ethics to ‘politics,’ the art of right legislation, on the indispensability of tradition.” Gadamer sets up Aristotle as “the founder of ethics as a discipline independent of metaphysics.”

We can set the stage for the implications of Gadamer’s work for our present concerns if we remind ourselves of its relation to his account of Aristotle. Gadamer insists that “the future of humanity…demands that we do not simply do everything we

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82 Id., p. 287 (emphasis added).
85 Id., p. 277.
86 Id., p. 282, citing *Nicomachean Ethics* X.10
87 Id., p. 310.
can but that we require *rational justification* for what we should do.\(^88\) But that rational justification is “connect[ed]…with the old impulse of an authentic practical and political common sense.”\(^89\) He presents us with a study of Aristotle’s three ethical treatises (the *Nicomachean Ethics, Magna Moralia*, and *Eudemian Ethics*) which pieces together, says Gadamer, Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s idea of the good. In these, according to Gadamer, “the decisive argument is that knowledge of such a good can have no relevance for the philosophy of human practice.”\(^90\) Gadamer claims that Aristotle’s “point” with respect to virtue “is not that one has to hold to the golden mean but that one ought to be aware of what one is actually doing when one does what is right,” for “extremes are always recognizable…[and] should be rejected whereas what is right as we know, cannot be definitively specified as such.”\(^91\) One then wonders what Aristotle means when he says (in a passage not cited by Gadamer) that “virtue both discovers and chooses the mean.”\(^92\)

In any event, Gadamer seizes on Aristotle’s well-known analogy between the good and the target at which an archer takes aim with his bow.\(^93\) He concludes from this that “plainly the illustration is intended to show that one does not rely on the theoretical

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\(^89\) Id.

\(^90\) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 128. Cf. also p. 151, citing *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b33ff. At least in this passage there is not a decisive rejection that there “is some one good” – only a suspension of that inquiry in favor of turning to what is “good for us.” One might stress, compatibly with Strauss’ interpretation *infra*, that this suspension occurs at the beginning of the text, rather than in Book X where the philosophical life is identified as the highest way of life.


\(^92\) *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a.

generalities of practical philosophy in the way that one relies on a rule.” Moreover he stresses that “taking aim does not by any means constitute the whole of archery,” and that “one has to have learned how to handle the bow.” Michael Walzer effectively makes a similar point when he says that, even if there were moral principles to which we might appeal, one would still have interpretive work to do in applying them to the given situation, a point that of course goes back to Kant’s claim that “logic contains, and can contain, no rules for judgment,” i.e., for application and thus that a rule “for the very reason that it is a rule…demands guidance from judgment.” Fully cognizant of Kant’s classic formulation, Gadamer emphasizes handling the bow over aiming at the target, i.e., stresses application over the rule itself.

As Gadamer explains, “application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning,” for “the interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself,”—just as the human being looking for guidance from ethical principles might try to apply them to himself—“but this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications.” Hence, that aspect of archery which is aiming for the target

94 Id., p. 164.
95 Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*
97 Id.
98 Id., p. 321.
takes on a very different meaning because we ourselves are involved in determining the placement of the target. The target is not “out there” as an object to be found and struck.

What he means is that the part of ourselves we bring to the target, or the text – or to our deliberative interlocutor – is the condition of our understanding. And yet, it is not as if Gadamer simple-mindedly thinks that we cannot render better and worse readings of a text or achieve better and worse understandings of our interlocutors. Far from it.

Gadamer constantly exhorts us to “be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” He goes so far in that direction as sometimes to sound hopeful of the kind of objective access to the text which it is his effort to reject, but he circles back to his view that one “cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings,” and that temporal distance “no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates,” but rather a “supportive ground,” a “positive and productive condition enabling understanding.”

Gadamer acknowledges that “[a]ll correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought.” At the same time, a “person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting,” because “the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular

100 Id., p. 295.
101 Id., p. 297.
102 Id., p. 269.
expectations in regard to a certain meaning."¹⁰³ That is because our own “fore-projection” is really the condition of our understanding at all. This is the general thrust of Gadamer’s well-known revival of “prejudice,” against the view of Enlightenment that prejudice is an obstacle to understanding and hence something to be excised, as well as the notion (in, e.g., Schleiermacher and Dilthey) that our own prejudices must be dispensed with if we are ever to achieve a meeting of the minds with an author. As he observes, “the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power,”¹⁰⁴ (an interpretation of the Enlightenment rejected by Albrecht Wellmer).¹⁰⁵ Rather, for Gadamer, our prejudice is always the condition of our understanding. We have to “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text,” and yet “this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it.”¹⁰⁶

According to Gadamer, a “person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be.”¹⁰⁷ That would seem to be the procedure of political narcissists or those afflicted by ressentiment, given their seriously impaired capacities for deliberative communication.

¹⁰³ Id.
¹⁰⁴ Id., p. 273.
¹⁰⁷ Id.
Those political actors are psychologically invested in ignoring or misperceiving the other, engaging in censored reading of the “text.” In contrast to those unprepared for deliberation, “a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something” and a “hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity.”\textsuperscript{108} Again, however, such a “sensitivity” is not “neutrality” or “the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices.”\textsuperscript{109} Hence the “object of research” is “actually constituted by the motivation of the inquiry.”\textsuperscript{110} There is no “object in itself” for Gadamer, at least not one that can be apprehended; such an object “clearly does not exist at all.”\textsuperscript{111}

In attempting to understand, “we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author’s mind.”\textsuperscript{112} Instead, the “miracle of understanding…is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning.”\textsuperscript{113} Prejudice may be the condition of sharing in this common meaning, but Gadamer does attempt to distinguish between those “productive prejudices that enable” it and the “prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings.”\textsuperscript{114} To be sure, the “real meaning of a text…is always co-determined…by the historical situation of the interpreter.” That is the significance of Gadamer’s quotation from Chladenius to the effect that the writer need not know the meaning of his own text, and according to Gadamer he cannot – because “[n]ot just

\begin{footnotes}
\item[108] Id.
\item[109] Id.
\item[110] Id., p. 285.
\item[111] Id.
\item[112] Id., p. 292.
\item[113] Id.
\item[114] Id., p. 295.
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occasionally, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.”115 Our “temporal distance” from a text, or one may say, our experiential distance from a deliberative participant, is actually a “positive and productive condition enabling understanding…not a yawning abyss.”116 Because the process of “discovering” the text’s “true meaning” is “never finished” and is “in fact an infinite process,” likewise the separation of non-productive prejudices or “fresh sources of error” are “constantly excluded” as well.117

Now how is the so-called miracle of understanding ever to transpire if we are constantly approaching the text, or our interlocutor, from within a certain tradition and on the basis of our own prejudices and fore-understanding? For the claim is not just that we approach texts from our own perspective – which is obviously true and trivial – but that we co-determine the meaning of texts and that the author is not in control of his own meaning. Gadamer has been criticized rampantly throughout the literature for his account of hermeneutics leading to relativism and preventing understanding. For example, Emilio Betti thinks that “Gadamer does not provide a stable normative principle by which the ‘correct’ meaning of a passage can be validly determined.”118 Likewise, E.D. Hirsch finds Gadamer caught up in “contradictions” for implying that “an interpreter can construe the original meaning of a past text” when he distinguishes between false and productive prejudices, while at the same time asserting the interpreter’s “historicity of

115 Id., p. 296.
116 Id., p. 297.
117 Id., p. 298.
118 Palmer, Hermeneutics, p. 61 (citing Betti).
understanding.”119 And of course, Gadamer’s claim that our prejudices are constitutive of the text’s meaning or that we inevitably project fore-understandings onto the text, would seem to promise little more than the sort of misunderstanding that so distresses Iris Marion Young (and rightly so) when she says that those purporting to put themselves in another’s shoes merely “project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves”120 in a manner which “displaces and silences the other.”121

B. The Critique from Habermas

Habermas is thoroughly aware of these issues, and was among the first to raise them in his debate with Gadamer, which one commentator calls “probably the most important one of the last 25 years.”122 Interestingly, given Habermas’s self-described status as a “58er” (a designation opposed to that carried by the generation of German student revolutionaries known as “68ers” and generally carrying a somewhat conservative, anti-revolutionary connotation),123 Habermas gives a sense of what hermeneutics is by describing its opposite as “[p]rotest”: the “reverse side of hermeneutic understanding,” wherein “distance [is] maintained] and communication is “broken off.”124 (This statement, which apparently appeared in published form in February 1967, nonetheless resonates strongly with “Habermas’s critique of student ‘actionism’” made

121 Id., p. 346
from “June 1967 to February 1969,” and defining the “actionist” as “one who engages in
‘[protest] action for action’s sake.’” 125) For Habermas, hermeneutics is the opposite of
protest; it aims at communication. It is, to be sure, prompted by an encounter with what
is foreign or other, and thus, according to Habermas, “[h]ermeneutic understanding…is
only articulated in situations of disturbed consensus.” 126 This is not to say that
interpretation does not happen where there is already consensus but that the consciously
hermeneutical effort is necessary wherever there is some aporia or apparent
misunderstanding. Hermeneutics would not have come about if interpretation were
instantaneous or easy. Hence it begins at “points of interruption.” 127
Habermas, Emilio Betti, and Wolfhart Pannenberg all believed that the “question of
critique in [Gadamer’s] hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish the true prejudices, by
which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand,” 128 pointed
beyond itself toward something like absolute knowledge in Hegel’s sense. Thus
Habermas believes that Gadamer “conceal[s] from himself that the practical connection
of understanding with the hermeneutic vantage point of the interpreter makes necessary
the hypothetical anticipation of a philosophy of history with a practical intent.” 129 In
other words, Gadamer behaves as if we can become aware of our prejudices and
situatedness, rendering better and worse judgments—and yet still somehow remain

125 Spector, Habermas, pp. 111-112 (quoting Habermas).
127 Id., p. 150.
128 Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 298.
confined by our own historicity. Habermas believes that at some point, “a structure of preunderstanding or prejudgment that has been rendered transparent can no longer function as a prejudice.” Indeed, Habermas worries that, by denying this, Gadamer thereby lends sole legitimating authority to the tradition in which we find ourselves; further reflection thus always ultimately confirms tradition. Pannenberg finds it “an odd spectacle to witness how a clear-sighted and profound author has his hands full keeping his thoughts from taking the direction in which they themselves point,” asserting that “the phenomena described by Gadamer push again and again in the direction of a universal conception of history which he – with Hegel’s system before his eyes – would precisely like to avoid.” Betti agrees, suggesting that “one could…try to refute the dialectical procedure suggested by [Gadamer] with the help of Hegel’s dialectic.”

Leo Strauss is, perhaps surprisingly, more open to Gadamer’s interpretation than most of his other critics, though one could say this is due to the politeness of his correspondence with Gadamer. Strauss sees right away the difficulty implicit in Gadamer’s assumption of the situatedness of human beings, but does not believe this presents a “logical difficulty” for Gadamer in the usual manner of a performative contradiction. Strauss hypothesizes that “the historical situation” to which Gadamer’s work “belongs is not a situation like other situations; it is ‘the absolute moment’ – similar

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130 Id., p. 237.
131 Id.
to the belonging of Hegel’s system to the absolute moment in the historical process. I say
similar and not identical…what one awakens to is not the final truth in the form of a
system but rather a question which can never be fully answered – a level of inquiry and
thinking which is mean to be the final level.”

Strauss uses a similar formulation in an essay published in the same year as his letter to Gadamer: reacting to Lukacs’ admission that historical materialism, applied to itself, meant that Marxism was “valid” only here and now, “within a certain order of society and production.” Strauss suggested Lukacs would be driven to conclude, in a Hegelian vein, that Marxism “is the final truth, since it belongs to the absolute moment in history in which the realm of necessity can be
surveyed in its entirety and therewith the outlines of the realm of freedom can come into
view for the first time.”

As Warnke sums it up, the two tendencies of Gadamer’s work may “founder on a dilemma”: Gadamer “can avoid opportunism in interpretation only by
becoming what one might call ‘conservative’ and accepting the truth of the object;
conversely it can avoid this conservatism only by becoming opportunistic and failing to
provide criteria for discriminating between understanding and misunderstanding.”

In other words, either we let the other speak for himself (and forego a hermeneutics of
suspicion), which amounts to a one-sided conversation; or, we acknowledge our

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involvement in co-determining meaning, without however any ready criteria for distinguishing better from worse understanding.

Habermas agrees with Gadamer that the author is not in control of meaning, arguing that it “corresponds to the historian’s experience that it is in principle not possible to give an adequate description of any event.”

He adverts to Arthur Danto’s notion of the “Ideal Chronicler” who, though capable of recording all historical events (hence, attaining perfect “objective” knowledge thereof), would be useless because he has “no point of view for interpretation.” Thus Habermas agrees with Gadamer and Danto that “the historian does not observe from the perspective of the actor” but instead “describes events and actions from within the experiential horizon of a history that transcends the actor’s horizon of expectations.”

Yet Habermas believes that the possibility of “reflection requires that the hermeneutical approach limit itself” and needs a “system of reference that transcends the context of tradition as such,” for “[o]nly then can tradition be criticized as well.” The problem with Gadamer is that since we are formed by Tradition and approach texts on the basis of our prejudices, the implication is we can see nothing else in the text but our own Tradition – confirming ourselves and leading to the allegedly conservative character of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Obviously, when this possibility is applied to the deliberative

138 Id., p. 157.
139 Id., p. 158.
140 Id., p. 170.
context, we can see Young’s concern that interlocutors will inevitably project their own concerns onto their fellow citizens is not too wide of the mark either.

C. Gadamer’s Reply: the Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer’s solution and answer to this is his famous doctrine of the “fusion of horizons,” whereby shared meaning becomes possible. Each of us, of course, occupies his own perspective and every “finite present has its limitations.” The standpoint we occupy is our “horizon,” the “range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage.” 

Someone who “has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him,” much as political narcissists who believe in the perfection of their grandiose selves and those afflicted by ressentiment who devalue what is other. To “have a horizon” at all “means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it.” In order to understand our interloctor, we must have a sort of “conversation…in order to get to know him – i.e., to discover where he is coming from and his horizon.” Now according to Gadamer, “this is not a true conversation – that is, we are not seeking agreement on some subject – because the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the horizon of the other person.”

Such conversations include “oral examinations and certain kinds of conversation between doctor and patient.”

141 Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 301.
142 Id.
143 Id., p. 302.
144 Id.
145 Id.
But in fact this is not enough because it still regards the other as a kind of object, or so Gadamer claims: the text “that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something true,” and the interlocutor who is understood psychoanalytically, presumably, is forced to abandon his claim to truth as well, for what is understood are the reasons underlying his speech rather than primarily the speech itself. But in fact Gadamer ultimately denies that this kind of historical or objective understanding is even possible, in the sense that the text cannot even honestly be regarded as an object (not just that we cannot access it as such). That is because we can “never have a truly closed horizon” and our “horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us.” Therefore, “transposing ourselves” into another horizon “consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards,” i.e., in misunderstanding by seeing them inevitably on the basis of our own prejudice. Rather, “it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.” Indeed, wherever it occurs, “understanding is always the fusion of these horizons,” the supposedly isolated horizon of the present and the historical horizon of the text, “supposedly existing by themselves.” For Gadamer, “[i]nterpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding.”

146 Id., p. 303.
147 Id., p. 304 (emphasis added).
148 Id., 305 (emphasis original).
149 Id., p. 306.
David Vessey agrees that “in practice determining the meaning of a sentence and determining how a sentence might be true are not two separate operations,” because the “relevant interpretive contexts, the historical horizons, are those that produce possibly true sentences.”\(^{150}\) Vessey’s example is the interpretation of Descartes’s comparison of the body to a machine: for how can we understand this without both knowing “what kind of thing a body is, and what kind of thing a machine is, but what kind of thing a seventeenth-century French philosopher would have thought a body and machine were”\(^{151}\) – or to put it more clearly than Vessey, the fusion of horizons requires the interpreter to take seriously both his own sense of the truth and that of the text. The text cannot be both understood and treated as an historical artifact, and likewise neither can the deliberative interlocutor be both understood and treated as a delusional neurotic. The perspective of the other must be taken as (potentially) true, and fused with one’s own, so that one may rise to a “higher universality” transcending the particularity of self and other.

This vision of attaining a higher perspective together with one’s interlocutor is extremely appealing, but one may ask whether this resolution really differs from the model of empathy Gadamer rejects. It does in one sense of course: that the perspective attained through hermeneutic understanding, while it does not and cannot ever fully grasp the meaning of one’s interlocutor, nevertheless promises a more elevated view than either participant was capable of on his own. In that sense, the idea of a fusion of horizons


\(^{151}\) Id., p. 539.
would seem tailor-made for deliberation. That is why Charles Taylor, for one, thinks that “Gadamer’s view” is “superior[]” to revivals in the vein of empathy such as Donald Davidson’s “principle of charity.”

(Davidson imports the phrase from Neil Wilson\footnote{Donald Davidson, “Introduction” in Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2001), p. xix.} and holds that “we must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about [and] we must maximize the self-consistency we attribute to him, on pain of not understanding him.”\footnote{Donald Davidson, “Truth and Meaning,” in Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation, p. 27}

Taylor criticizes Davidson with practically the same point as Iris Marion Young, warning that “translating [the other’s] words into my language” risks rendering those words too narrowly in “the language I speak at the moment of encounter” – as the Spanish conquistadors “understood” the Aztecs, i.e., not on their own terms but in terms projected on them, e.g., as those who “worship the Devil,” obviously a flagrant misunderstanding of the Aztec perspective.\footnote{Taylor, “Understanding the Other,” p. 292.} For that reason Taylor endorses the fusion of horizon as a model for the politics of recognition, with particular reference to encounters among cultures. In Taylor’s view, what is distinctive about a fusion of horizons versus a merely empathic understanding of another is that even if “we ultimately find substantive support for our initial presumption” in a situation of deliberative disagreement, through a fusion of horizons we will “have reached the judgment partly through transforming our standards.”\footnote{Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Multiculturalism, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 25-73, at p. 67.}
Whether Gadamer’s fusion of horizons suffices as an answer to Habermas, I confess I cannot resolve here, though I find the controversy engrossing. Moreover, as I suggest in the question above, I am not sure that the supposedly greater understanding of the “fusion of horizons” model is more than a formally superior model of understanding than is psychoanalytic empathy or vicarious introspection, however much this may be forced to modify itself to accommodate Gadamer’s critique of earlier hermeneutical approaches. As one of Gadamer’s least forgiving critics observes, “Gadamer’s attempted solution [the fusion of horizons] turns out, on analysis, to exemplify the very difficulty it was designed to solve. How can an interpreter fuse two perspectives – his own and that of the text – unless he has somehow appropriated the original perspective and amalgamated it with his own,” i.e., “how can it be affirmed that the original sense of a text is beyond our reach and, at the same time, that valid interpretation is possible?”¹⁵⁷

Whatever the theoretical objections to this issue, the import for our concerns is this: even if Gadamer’s account is right and we need to relinquish or modify a simple notion of empathy with a view to understanding each other in deliberation, does the fusion of horizons not still necessarily imply that we can and must enlarge our perspective in the depth hermeneutical manner of which psychoanalysis is just one example? Gadamer may claim in response to Habermas that “anyone who sees through his social partners to something hidden to them, i.e., who does not take their role-acting

seriously, is a ‘spoil-sport’ who will be avoided”\textsuperscript{158} in deliberation. But this is only a kind of prudential or prognostic argument about what is likely to happen, one that could be avoided by exercising some care in deliberation. It is not an argument that the “higher universality” attained through Gadamer’s fusion of horizons cannot include insights into the self that exceed those we have prior to the deliberative encounter. Indeed, the claim that our “meaning” exceeds what we can intend, like that of historical incidents whose significance and relevance is clear only from some distance, implies just this possibility.

Accordingly, we find no contradiction between the depth hermeneutical mode of psychoanalysis and Gadamer’s account, for both require an effort of interpretation and both permit greater understanding as the result of the deliberative encounter.

\textbf{Psychoanalysis and the Therapeutic Alliance as a Model for Deliberation}

Although Habermas, pointing out that “Freud conceived of sociology as applied psychology”\textsuperscript{159} postulated that psychoanalysis could function as a supporting basis for a critical social theory in \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests}, there has not been much subsequent development of this idea in Habermas’s thought. (Warren notes that Habermas has only mentioned psychoanalysis in passing since that time.) To be sure, Habermas was not the first to deploy “a combination of Marx and Freud”\textsuperscript{160} or a combination of social criticism and psychoanalytic theory. His Frankfurt School predecessors, Horkheimer and Fromm, made such a case for the union of Marxist social

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[159] Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Knowledge and Human Interests} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 274.
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theory and psychoanalysis that "[i]t“is difficult for us to imagine today” that the two “were once regarded as irreconcilably opposed.” And of course Marcuse actually engaged in prominent examples of psychoanalytically minded social criticism in *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man*.

Part of the reason Habermas did not develop this may have been criticism (though, on the other hand, this has not stopped him from responding to critics in other areas of his thought; as Mendelson rightly notes, “it is characteristic of Habermas that he approaches theoretical positions by opening up critical theory to insights from competing philosophical and scientific traditions”). For example, in a review of Habermas skeptical of the “analyst-patient dialogue” as a model for critical social theory, Anthony Giddens suggested that “none of [the] conditions” for that “preexisting consensual system” of the psychoanalytic setting are actually present “in the circumstances of actual social life, for example in situations of class domination.” Fred Dallmayr questioned whether it is “possible to transfer the doctor-patient relationship from psychiatry to the social domain without encouraging intellectual presumptuousness and possibly the formation of another elite of experts?”

Giddens is of course correct that the model of psychoanalytic dialogue would be a highly inappropriate one for dealing with “class domination.” But such an example

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would involve a set of participants (e.g., the wealthy) motivated by their frank rapacity and self-interest rather than any sub-surface psychological phenomena that block deliberation. And if it is true that “men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony,” Giddens may be right that other means than dialogue may be necessary to alter such an order in any case. Likewise, Dallmayr is correct that a psychoanalytically minded approach to deliberation could lead to an off-putting pretentiousness whereby citizens purport to analyze one another in a manner no different than finger-pointing – precisely Gadamer’s worry in distinguishing the “person” from the “claim” and his point about arm-chair analysts being seen as “spoil-sports” in deliberation – and, worse, could set up figures of false authority. But the approach to deliberation we suggest is not an overeager attempt to constrain the other through diagnosis or to embarrass our interlocutor.

In fact, the goal of analysis is to get the patient to speak of what has been “shut[] out” and to say to himself: “I’ve always known that really. I’ve just never thought about it.” Frequently this takes the form of not communicating to the patient one’s impression of him. Partly, of course, this is in order to gain a more complete understanding of the patient, but this is also because of the obvious risk that the patient, confronted too early with a diagnosis from the analyst, would leave the therapy enraged. As a model for deliberation, this could only serve to give offense. That is why, for one

thing, we have to take seriously the tactical measures of psychotherapy in facilitating the “therapeutic alliance” or “working alliance” which has long been held to be “the major factor in change achieved through psychotherapy.”\(^{167}\)

Now one could object: by propounding a model that assumes an alliance between patient and analyst, are we not insisting from the beginning on the very relation we have sought to achieve among deliberative participants, that of mutual respect? And the answer is no: we mean something along the lines of what Alexander Wendt suggests when he argues that state behavior is learned and premised on the history of their interactions with their fellow participants in the state system. The supposedly “anarchic” structure of the international system is actually the result of such a learning process: hence Wendt considers “two actors – ego and alter – encountering each other for the first time.”\(^{168}\) “In the beginning is ego’s gesture, which may consist for example of an advance, a retreat, a brandishing of arms, a laying down of arms, or an attack” and “alter…must make an inference…about ego’s intentions,” e.g., “whether ego is a threat” and then proceed on that basis.\(^{169}\) Thus the two hypothetical states respond based on such gestures and the inferences they draw therefrom. We are saying similarly that the analytic relationship, like any relationship, is susceptible to and proceeds from such gestures in the maintenance of the relationship. We do not claim that these gestures alone lead to mutual respect, but they surely can rescue the relationship from total rupture, even

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\(^{169}\) Id.
where the patient is predisposed (by his own history and the transference of past figures onto the analyst) to some degree of hostility to the analyst. Psychoanalysis is replete with case histories wherein the analyst is forced to overcome, and does overcome, an initial hostility, fear, contempt, etc., on the part of the patient.

Hence Kohut speaks of “emergency measures which are required to create an emotional bond with the analyst…which will initially keep the patient from leaving the therapy.”

Recalling August Aichhorn’s work with juvenile delinquents, Kohut states that “[i]t was Aichhorn’s special skill and understanding for the delinquent that led him to offer himself first as a mirror image of the delinquent’s grandiose self.” Aichhorn’s “active technique for the creation of a therapeutically effective emotional attachment to the analyst” was, in Anna Freud’s words, to present to the juvenile delinquent “a glorified replica of his own delinquent ego and ego-ideal.” Needless to say, such an approach totally abjures any tendency to confront our deliberative partners with anything “diagnostic,” at least at that stage of the relationship.

And in fact, what we want to suggest here is a psychoanalytic approach to deliberation that eschews the matter of diagnosis more or less completely. We would stress that the manner of deliberation should be inflected by psychoanalytic insights, and that our interlocutors be led to greater self-understanding rather indirectly, rather than that we crudely take this exhortation as license to tell our fellow citizens what we think about them. To take another example from Aichhorn: if a “patient’s guilt feelings toward

170 Kohut, Analysis of the Self, p. 162.
171 Id., p. 163.
172 Id., p. 161 (quoting Anna Freud).
him had to be diminished in order to become available for analysis, he would ask small symbolic favors, for instance, he would ask the patient to buy a newspaper for him or a package of cigarettes,”¹⁷³ obviously putting the position of feeling less guilty and better able to communicate in the analysis. Or, if “he felt that the patient was keeping guilt feelings or other related conflicts out of the transference, he would mobilize them effectively by simply asking the patient to make out his own bill at the end of the next month,”¹⁷⁴ placing the patient in direct confrontation with how much he owed to the analyst and hence in fuller apprehension of his own sense of guilt. Again, none of these devices was actually communicated to the patient, which would have defeated their purpose. And so it should be in deliberation generally. The aim is not to engage in actual psychoanalysis, but to proceed in a psychoanalytically informed way.

Let us not fail to notice that, in calling for a psychoanalytically informed mode of deliberation, we are implicitly agreeing with those who believe that rhetoric has a place in deliberation. At least where our interlocutors have (we suspect) psychological obstacles which prevent them from participating with us more fully in deliberation, we must speak to them with a certain psychoanalytically informed rhetoric, analogous to the devices employed by Aichhorn. Consider the recent controversy over the slogans “Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter.” Even if we were to find the latter proposition more valid, we could certainly understand the attractiveness of the former to blacks who feel marginalized, and in attempting to win their agreement to the latter principle in a

¹⁷⁴ Id.
broaden consensus, we most assuredly would not begin by accusing them of, e.g., factional
interest in their attraction to “Black Lives Matter.” Surely the adherence to that slogan
is driven precisely by the feeling that they are not counted among the idea that “All Lives
Matter” and the particularism of their slogan is a reaction to that. A psychoanalytically
minded approach to deliberation would counsel us not to address those who feel marginalized
with arguments they will interpret as demands for self-denial.

We take no position whether rhetoric is always necessary to deliberation, or whether it
is properly the preserve of pre-deliberative communication, just as we take no position
whether emotion can properly be excised from deliberative reasoning or whether it is
omnipresent and to be regarded as such. Certainly addressing political narcissism and
ressentiment requires a very careful use of rhetoric, however. It is a rhetoric that arises
from an attempt to understand the other. But we cannot deny that, like perhaps all rhetoric,
it involves some degree of manipulativeness or prudence. And it raises a problem, apparently
not contemplated by Habermas when he put forth the psychoanalytic model, of how the “prudent”
speech of the analyst, though not strategic action in the sense of redounding to his own
self-interest, can nonetheless count as “communicative action” in Habermas’s strict
definition. Psychoanalysis pushes in the direction of the “inescapable” nature of “manipulation
and deceit,”\textsuperscript{175} that Grant has discerned in

Rousseau (in “the Legislator’s relation to the citizens and in the tutor’s relation to Emile.”), and the “virtues of mendacity” in politics that Jay observes.

Nonetheless, to conceive of psychoanalysis as therefore a model more appropriate to agonistic dialogue than deliberation, as Nancy Luxon does, totally misconstrues the nature of the relation between analyst and patient. Luxon is correct that psychoanalysis assumes an intermittent combative element – the analyst has to get past the “defenses” and “resistances” of the patient – and in a sense cannot proceed without this form of combativeness, if that is the right word. But whatever agonism there is in analysis is one-sided, and the aim is not “combat” as Luxon asserts but disarmament. Any actual combative effort from the analyst would be absolutely fatal to the therapeutic alliance, as is obvious and as Luxon fails to acknowledge. That is what any combativeness from the analyst is always conceived of, in the psychoanalytic literature, as counter-transference. The literature is replete with exhortation that the analyst, while perhaps never managing to free himself of counter-transference, must nonetheless be ever-vigilant lest he lapse and step out of his “analytic neutrality.” Luxon is surely aware of this, since she herself explains that Freud cautions analysts to be aware of their own “psychic resistances that might affect their practice,” but does not draw the implications for her argument.

What she characterizes as the “combative collaboration” of psychoanalysis is in fact a

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176 Id., p. 103.
179 Id., p. 406 n. 49.
temporary, transitional state meant to be supplanted – by collaboration, in the absence of resistance or defense.

Psychoanalysis is, ultimately, a depth hermeneutical model of dialogue that exists between empathy and interpretation. It does seek to empathize, but it never ceases the effort to interpret. Kohut speaks of a patient, “a long, long analysis with a woman who was extremely vulnerable”:

She was deeply depressed, and at times I thought I would lose her – that she would finally find a way out of the suffering and kill herself. But I didn’t. At one time at the very worst moment of her analysis, during the first year or perhaps year and a half, she was so badly off I suddenly had the feeling [and said]: ‘How would you feel if I let you hold my fingers, for a little while now while you are talking? Maybe that would help you.’ Doubtful maneuver. I am not recommending it, but I was desperate. I was deeply worried. So I gave her two fingers, moved up a little bit in my chair, gave her two fingers. And now I’ll tell you what is so nice about that story. Because an analyst always remains an analyst. I gave her my two fingers. She took hold of them, and I immediately made a genetic interpretation to myself. It was the toothless gums of a very young child clamping down on an empty nipple. That was the way it felt. I didn’t say anything. I don’t know whether it was right. But I reacted to it even there, to myself, as an analyst. [After this one occasion] that was never necessary anymore. I wouldn’t say it turned the tide, but it overcame a very, very difficult impasse at a given dangerous moment, and gaining time that way we went on for many, many more years with a reasonably substantial success.180

The analyst never ceases to interpret, nor to empathize, because interpretation is itself a higher form of empathy, within the same “developmental line of empathy”181 as the “bodily holding”182 of the child by the patient which “communicates the empathic

181 Id., p. 534.
182 Id., p. 533.
understanding.” Some of our interlocutors are prepared to benefit from higher forms of empathy, and some are not. For the latter, the wise partner in dialogue, like the wise analyst, keeps his “interpretation to myself” and speaks to the patient in the manner she can hear.

**Conclusion**

We have sought to argue that a hermeneutical approach, whether construed as empathic or interpretive (if that is even a valid distinction) is vital for deliberation because political speech often arises from motives and psychological constellations of which we may be unaware. We have argued that, whatever one’s hermeneutical commitments, psychoanalysis is a fruitful model for deliberation because it promises insights for its participants which can lead to greater self and mutual understanding, yielding the chance for greater consensus. Now, by way of conclusion let us begin to sketch out something of a methodology of the hermeneutics of suspicion, applied not toward understanding our interlocutors but to deliberating with them politically.

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183 Id., p. 534.
184 Id., p. 535.
5. Conclusion - Reading Between the Lines of Tradition: Toward a Methodology of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Introduction

Having agreed with Habermas that, granting Gadamer his hermeneutic insights, this still “does not relieve [us] of the business of methodology as such,”¹ we are faced with the task of actually applying a hermeneutics of suspicion in deliberative discourse. Now, if Kant’s formulation holds that methodological rules require still further rules for applying them, then to some extent judgment is an unavoidable aspect of interpretation. But does this mean that the strain of hermeneutics represented for instance, by Schleiermacher, is wholly useless? We think not, and in what follows we argue that hermeneutical guidelines serve to place a “thumb on the scale” in the proper direction, even if not determining hermeneutical outcomes in advance. By way of conclusion, therefore, we would like to offer some preliminary sketches of what such guidelines might look like, and how they might function.

The particular problem we are concerned with is this: assuming deliberation is under way, how can we ensure that arguments are made in a way that does not marginalize participants or silence minority voices? Assuming further that justificatory discourse centers on the interpretation of shared norms, as Mouffes suggests it will, the problem becomes how to read between the lines of Tradition such that the dominant narratives of our traditionary history do not overwhelm the political discourse to the

detriment of minorities. At bottom, a methodology of this kind is in the nature of guidelines for conducting immanent critique.

Accordingly, we proceed as though “it is always possible to distinguish between the just and the unjust, the legitimate and the illegitimate,” and that “this can only be done from within a given tradition, with the help of standards that this tradition provides.”

Michael Walzer’s *Interpretation and Social Criticism* is emblematic of such an approach and, unsurprisingly in the light of foregoing chapters, one scholar observes that Walzer’s “conclusions...serve to support the thrust of a Gadamerian ethics and politics.” Another has grouped Walzer together with Gadamer as those who have “acknowledged the historical or cultural situatedness of social criticism.”

For Walzer, the social critic is a “connected critic,” “one of us,” and “his appeal is to local or localized principles.”

Walzer casts off the search for an objective morality and instead pursues an “interpretive” path which begins from existing moral traditions, even flirting with the more radical position that “there is really only one path in moral philosophy” because “philosophical discovery and invention…are disguised interpretations.” Thus he cites with approval the Midrashic commentary on Psalm 12:7, which has Moses asking of God “in what way shall we know the true sense of a law?” and God answering “the majority is to be

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6 Id., p. 21.
followed.” Walzer’s vision of the connected critic may be the proper one for the practitioner of social criticism within deliberative democracy, but it leaves us the problem of ensuring that the minor themes of Tradition are kept resonant within deliberative discourse, lest political minorities become marginalized and we perpetuate the psychological consequences we began this dissertation by attending to.

In deliberation, our justificatory criteria are therefore necessarily social, i.e., internal to our politics. When we justify a given policy, when we speak of what is the “right thing to do,” we do so in terms of what is right for us, what it is that we do. This could not be more prevalent in our own political discourse, for example, where politicians routinely invoke what we as Americans do or have done as a justification for what, now, we should do. This is particularly visible in debates over immigration policy, where xenophobic passions are often checked by powerful narratives recalling a political heritage of generosity toward immigrants that, besides inviting “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” welcomed even the “wretched refuse of your teeming shore” – such was the magnanimity of one strain of the American tradition. To take one crude but visible recent example, the right to citizenship of those born to non-citizen parents in the United States has been challenged by presidential candidate Donald Trump. And the discourse reacting to this proposal, much of it

7 Id., p. 32, n. 23.
outraged, has attacked it as “un-American,” as contrary to our history and not what we do.9

But even issues that appear purely technical, such as whether to station troops at bases abroad, necessarily implicate standards internal to our tradition. It is a cliché of American political discourse to pose the question whether the United States should be “the world’s policeman” (usually the answer is negative). And so on for a great many other political issues that may be matters of deliberation – they compel us to justify ourselves using standards internal to our politics. And these standards – which arise from our narratives about ourselves, our shared history and identity – we shall call Tradition. As Gadamer maintains, and as we for the purposes of these preliminary sketches accept, though mindful of Habermas’s misgivings, “the content of the tradition itself is the sole criterion” which measures whether the interpretation is valid.10

We are pointing this out to suggest that internal, political criteria of justice, while absolutely necessary to the step of justification involved in deliberation, necessarily drive us to seek analogies with interpretive endeavors where the criteria are internal as well. We are driven, that is to say, once more to the model of textual interpretation. For if Tradition is our sole justificatory criterion, and Tradition includes, e.g., our shared norms, we have to consider how it is possible that the “text” of Tradition can contain multiple, perhaps even conflicting, narratives, and how to reconcile these in deliberation which aims at consensus.

Warnke’s very Gadamerian response is to argue that we can “agree on public reasons and considerations while understanding them in different but equally compelling ways.”11 Thus, she disagrees with Gutmann and Thompson that “appeal to public reasons and considerations resolves the issue” of disagreement, pointing out it simply defers the problem and “raises the question of how we are to understand these public reasons and considerations.”12 Hence she criticizes Gutmann and Thompson’s hope that a “deep reverence for life” and “deeper level of morality…could transcend moral differences at the level of policy” in the abortion debate because “the debate involves diverging understandings of what human life itself is and how it elicits reverence.”13

Likewise, Joy Gordon has recently argued that UN Security Council resolutions – such as those allowing “humanitarian relief” to the Kurds and cited by the US, UK and France “as authority for establishing no-fly zones, and enforcement through bombing strikes”14 – are the site of “political hermeneutics” and clashes of interpretation. But since there is no “external body that can provide dispositive interpretations of these provisions,” the interpretations states adopt “will reflect the balance of power among the permanent members.”15

For the sake of deliberation, therefore, we need so to speak some liberal canons of construction that would place a thumb on the scale of interpretation in such a way that, as

12 Id., p. 757.
13 Id., p. 758.
15 Id., at p. 762.
we construe our shared norms in Tradition, minority views are not drowned out by the weight of opinion or excluded as non-public reasons ex ante. We therefore begin to formulate two approaches to “reading between the lines” of traditionary discourse inspired by the hermeneutics of suspicion and particularly by Straussian and psychoanalytic approaches which privilege latent aspects of the text – here, the text of Tradition.

How to Read Between the Lines of Tradition: Two Approaches from the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

A. The Straussian Approach: a Liberal Esotericism?

Needless to say, Leo Strauss is a surprising figure from whom to draw a hermeneutics aimed at preserving minority views in deliberative discourse. But let us suspend our impulse to disbelief for the moment. How does Strauss’s hermeneutics function? According to Strauss, the “task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves, or to revitalize their thought according to their own interpretation of it.”¹⁶ Obviously, as we saw in the last chapter, this expression of an emphatically Enlightenment and objectifying approach to hermeneutics is deeply contested by contemporary philosophy, by Gadamer above all.

But there is more to Strauss’s approach than that highly controversial claim. For Strauss’s interpretative strategy is premised, to begin with, on the text itself and indeed radically on the text itself, as distinguished from the author’s intention. Now we do not

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mean this in a naïve way or in the manner of the truisms that find expression in legal approaches, where nothing is more trivial than the observation that one must “begin with the text” of the constitution or statute. Still, as an interpretive strategy, this choice does stand for something. For instance, it stands, in contrast to the Cambridge School, for the primacy of the text over context. In the psychoanalytic vein, the primacy of the “text” of the psyche is much less controversial, but even in that field there are some for whom the family system (the “context” within which the individual psyche develops) is primary. For family systems analysts, the individual psyche must be understood in relation to the group or family system, much as the Cambridge School rejects textual analysis “in a vacuum.”

By and large, however, the psychoanalytic tradition shares with the Straussian the primacy of the “text.” The psyche “is” the text – or rather, the verbal expressions of mind are the only psychic phenomena, the only expressions of the self, that are manifest enough to be subject to psychoanalysis. In the psychoanalytic situation the analyst must begin with the explicit statements of the analysand. And so it is with Straussian and other approaches according to which one must “begin with the text.”

However, a Straussian reader, though beginning with the explicit statements of the text, like the well-trained psychoanalyst, sooner or later becomes attentive to what Habermas has called “points of interruption” in the text, i.e., moments of incomprehension. In Freudian slips, the analyst begins to suspect the operation of that

17 Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, p. 150.
unseen force, the unconscious, in certain suggestive patterns of the analysand’s explicit statements. The Gestalt analyst even permits himself to draw conclusions from physical gestures of the analysand, recognizing (just as Habermas does) that these, too, are communications: “if the forces which determine bodily behavior are structurally similar to those which characterize the corresponding mental states, it may become understandable why physical meaning can be read off directly from a person’s appearance and conduct.”\textsuperscript{18} Hence, “the way a person dresses, keeps his room, handles the language…can be called expressive in that they permit conclusions about the personality or the temporary state of mind of the individual.”\textsuperscript{19} And the Straussian reader, attentive to certain ambivalences, contradictions, apparent errors, or curious silences in a text, begins to read silences and to suspect esoteric content existing between the lines of the text. That is to say, the Straussian approach like the psychoanalytic, divines “material” or “speech” within the text that is additional to the explicit statements of the text, communicated indirectly and perhaps unwittingly.

Of course the classical debate over textual interpretation has been a struggle between so-called reader-oriented approaches on one side, and those who seek to limit a text’s possible meaning through a search for the author’s intention on the other. Now, the “attempt to limit the range of relevant meaning conferring contexts or to halt the endlessly self-dissolving instabilities of writing has been stigmatized as

\textsuperscript{19} Id., p. 302.
‘authoritarian.’”

No doubt this is one reason why Straussian approaches to interpretation have been so widely reviled as themselves manifesting an anti-democratic inclination because Strauss’s stated goal of understanding the author’s intent exercises a constraining force on interpretation (though at the same time, since the intent is esoteric, that claim is actually much more open than acknowledged). On the other hand, though Strauss had some very kind things to say about democracy (if these may be taken as sincere), his preference for aristocracy and the rule of philosopher-kings – together with his recognition of the near impossibility of such political arrangements – seems almost beyond debate. In any event we will not encumber ourselves with the task of proving Strauss’s pro-democratic sympathies, as some scholars have sought to do.22

There is no doubt that perceptions of Strauss’s own politics have tainted his approach to textual interpretation for many theorists. This has put many of his critics in the awkward position of sponsoring somewhat more conservative approaches to textual interpretation than they might have consciously endorsed if they were not engaged in polemics against Strauss.23 The awkward result has been his critics on the “left” admonishing Strauss for his outrageous textual interpretations in the same way that many

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21 Let it not be said that Strauss did not recognize, with all those working toward social justice, that “cruder forms of social inequality [give] way to subtler forms of social inequality…the social inequality [does] not for this reason become less of a hardship.” Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” Modern Judaism, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May, 1981), p. 21.
critics on the “right” have rolled their eyes at deconstructionist literary studies – a curious reversal of roles, since Strauss’s critics tend to have a great sympathy for the continental tradition in philosophy. At the same time there is the spectacle of better-loved figures like Habermas, citing Strauss’s supposedly ludicrous and deeply controversial interpretation of Machiavelli as if it were just one of the established texts of the period: “for a critical study from the viewpoint of classical Natural Law,” says Habermas helpfully, “see L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*”\(^{24}\)

All this confusion is perhaps as it should be. For as I shall argue, the Straussian approach, shorn of its rhetorical ornamentation is really more at home within the reader-oriented approaches we associate with continental philosophy. This is not to say that Strauss himself would not have disagreed with our placement of him in this coterie, but it is to say that his approach, taken for what it is, is more at home there than elsewhere.

And here it is well to notice something implicit in what has just been said, which is that we are to some extent proceeding in (it would seem) reckless disregard of authorial intention. For we are saying that the Straussian approach “is” what it is, over and above Strauss’s characterization of it. And in doing so, we are implicitly disregarding his stated intention, at least to some degree, as the source and fount of its meaning, much as Gadamer suggests we would, if the author is not the final arbiter of his own meaning. Here, again, we see the second reason why the Straussian approach has been met with such opposition: beyond Strauss’s own political inclinations, he characterizes his

readings as absolutely guided by authorial intention. His task, as he characterizes it, is to understand an author as he understands himself. As Strauss says quite clearly, “the seemingly infinite variety of ways in which a given teaching can be understood does not do away with the fact that the originator of the doctrine understood it in one way only, provided he was not confused.”25 And of course this position is, to speak crudely, a rather conservative one by the standards of contemporary hermeneutics. On the other hand, there are readers (myself among them) like Remi Brague who suspect that “the Straussian Maimonides” – like the Straussian Plato or any of Strauss’s interlocutors – “might be, at least in part, a construction and the projection into the past of a personal project,” i.e., Strauss’s own willful and esoteric construction.26 This is to say that Strauss may have been writing philosophy in the guise of scholarly commentary rather than explicating esoteric texts in good faith. That possibility is certainly left open once we assume that Strauss’s commentaries are not intended merely to reveal, as indeed is the case is we accept that “Strauss believed the ancient view [of rhetoric] was correct and learned to write as he read.”27

In any event, working against Strauss at the same time has been his justification of his apparently fantastical interpretations in the name of authorial intention. To do so, he had recourse to the tradition of esoteric reading, a strategy certain to prompt skepticism among contemporary readers. There is a fair amount to be said for Strauss’s

25 Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” p. 67.
arguments for esotericism as an historical matter, and they have prompted some scholars to do the painstaking and necessary work of actually cataloguing the long history of esotericism.\textsuperscript{28} But there is no denying that couching Strauss’s unlikely interpretations in the language of authorial intention forced him to posit esotericism as an argumentative strategy because they almost all contradict the prevailing views of the texts. How much different might the reception and history of the Straussian approach might have been if Strauss had theorized along the lines of, say, a Barthes or Derrida, and published textual studies totally unmoored to the historical intentions of their authors?

In declining to adopt Strauss’s own characterization of his method, we are certainly foreshadowing the fact that we are not purporting to be guided exclusively by authorial intention in interpretation. Indeed, the “text” with which we are predominantly concerned, i.e., Tradition, does not have an easily discernable authorial intention. There are myths, there are narratives, but intentionality is diffuse – more so even than the intentions underlying, say, a statute voted into law by a multi-member legislative body, a classic target for those skeptical of intentionality.

Michael Frazer’s has been among the best attempts to come to grips with Strauss’s method.\textsuperscript{29} Noticing Strauss’s several accounts of the underlying rationale for esotericism, Frazer sets out to determine which of these is the true account. In doing so, he wrestles with the problem of ever discovering what Strauss’s own views, which may


have been presented esoterically, actually were. Finally, Frazer concludes that Strauss’s esotericism was itself exoteric. It was rhetorical, part of a poetic “appeal to his students’ passions in order to recruit them as philosophers.”30 As Frazer says, quoting Lampert, “the possibility of a treasure hunt through the classics of the philosophical canon, the chance to search for secrets where once there were only dry doctrines is, as Lampert says ‘so entertaining in its intricacies, so intoxicating in its audacity,’ that it can make difficult study of philosophical texts feel like a grand game.”31 And Strauss’s exoteric esotericism “through its insistence on an unbridgeable divide between the wise and the vulgar, seduces students into a life of philosophy by appealing directly to their vanity, a vice which so often characterizes the young.”32 The point of Strauss’s appeal to the excitement and vanity of youth is to entice the young into the pursuit of philosophy. Moreover, by forcing students to reach the “truth” through esoteric reading, the young are forced not only to think for themselves but to uncover only gradually the “truth[s]” which may “appear[] at first to be repulsive and depressing.”33 And once they have matured into philosophers, they will see through Strauss’s elaborate esoteric game and come to “thank Strauss for his benevolent pedagogical deceptions.”34

Frazer rightly refrains from insisting that “Strauss never actually believed any of the great thinkers of the Western tradition wrote esoterically, that the practice of

30 Id., p. 52.
31 Id., p. 52.
32 Id., p. 53.
33 Id., p. 50, quoting Strauss.
34 Id., p. 53.
esotericism is for him an entirely exoteric myth.”35 That would contravene a great deal of evidence, for example Strauss’s correspondence with Kojeve,36 on the historical question of whether Strauss actually believed in esotericism, but Frazer somewhat fineses this by treating it as an issue of the manner in which Strauss thought texts were esoteric (“how” philosophers “write esoterically”) and “to what degree they mask their true teachings.”37 He concedes that his account of Strauss’s exoteric or pedagogical esotericism is a “new account of esotericism that is compatible with Strauss’s deeds, if not always his words.”38

And in presenting an account of esotericism that willfully disregards some of Strauss’s statements, Frazer is really only a step away from the abstract esotericism we are advocating here. For by determining to abstract from Strauss’s account of esotericism and essentially to claim that Strauss’s esoteric interpretations are exoteric, i.e., contrived, Frazer claims that we need not concern ourselves with the historical question of whether in fact the texts are esoteric or whether they mean what Strauss says they mean. It makes little difference, philosophically, whether Strauss’s commentaries align with the text they purport to explicate, or whether in fact they stand on their own merits as philosophical treatises masquerading as esoteric commentaries.

If therefore we have resolved to abstract from Strauss’s politics as well as look past his characterization of his method as somehow guided by intention, what remains?

35 Id., p. 34.
37 Frazer, “Esotericism Ancient and Modern,” p. 35.
38 Id., p. 49.
One scholar goes so far as to say that “Strauss’s hermeneutic approach is in an important sense without content.”39 Another allows that, in the esoteric mode of reading we find certain “principles of interpretation, but not rules, unless one means rules in the sense of rules of thumb.”40 While it is true that an approach derived from Strauss’s hermeneutics is not as deterministic of meaning as some would wish – and it cannot be, if rules inevitably require judgment for their application -- neither is such an approach wholly open. Strauss absolutely propounds a hermeneutic “method” though he acknowledges in the same breath that “the method of reading which I suggest can never lead to absolute certainty.”41 And if it is true that “reading between the lines will not” on its own “lead to complete agreement among scholars,” we might ask whether it is enough for our purposes that the latent material it uncovers in the text surfaces at all, rather than being suppressed and excluded from discourse. Besides, that statement is not a theoretical but a practical observation or prediction. And Strauss likewise asks whether “alternative methods of reading lead to absolute certainty?”42 Moreover, as I argue in what follows, by abstracting the productive aspects of Strauss’s hermeneutical method from the historical controversies that bedevil Straussian interpretation, we should be able to employ it in obtaining a great deal more consensus than Strauss ever did.

**Esoteric Reading is Not Strict Constructionist**

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41 Strauss, “On a Forgotten King of Writing” in *What is Political Philosophy*, p. 231.
Certain of Strauss’s critics, even friendly and intelligent ones like Dante Germino, have criticized him for his “strict constructionist interpretation of the great texts in political theory.” In spite of the Straussian reputation for hypertextualism, it should be obvious that “reading between the lines” is absolutely not a kind of literalism or, for example, a strict constructionism in the style of the American legal academy. This can be confusing at times given how penetrating a reader of texts Strauss himself was. One comes away from his commentaries humbled by Strauss’s intimacy with the text. Perhaps further cause for confusion is Strauss’s admonition that “[o]nly such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate.” Hence we have to begin with great vigilance as to the explicit character of the text. But here we cannot ignore the qualifying phrase “starts from” – practically the same admonition in every case of constitutional or statutory construction, that we must “begin with the text.”

Moreover, we must remember that a mere textualism would not suffice in any event. If it did, we would not have divergent views argued from the very same text, as frequently happens in policy debates or in cases involving statutory construction. As Strauss recognizes, “we sometimes observe a conflict between a traditional, superficial and doxographic interpretation of some great writer of the past, and a more intelligent, deeper and monographic interpretation.” This phenomenon is well known; for

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44 Strauss, Persecution, p. 30.
45 Id., p. 31.
example, the difference between the simple-minded reading of a classic and the more patient, unrelenting reading in a work of criticism, say. It is something akin to the difference between the views of a high school English teacher and a Harold Bloom. Strauss thinks this is a sign that the “monographic interpretation,” i.e., the more sophisticated interpretation, “stops halfway between the exoteric and esoteric teaching of the author.”\textsuperscript{46} It is better than the vulgar view, but it does not go far enough. In any event, for our purposes Strauss observes that these two views are, in fact, “equally exact, so far as both are borne out by explicit statements of the writer concerned.”\textsuperscript{47} Hence even Strauss recognizes that the primacy of the text does not settle all debates, for it is possible to support widely divergent interpretations using the explicit statements of a writer, as Warnke suggests of interpretation when she says that adverting to supposedly transcendant principles such as a “deeper reverence for life” does little to settle interpretive disagreement.

An especially clear example of a text posing an interpretive problem which the text itself may not readily answer is given by Quentin Skinner in his best-known methodological essay. Skinner brings to mind Bacon’s remark from the \textit{Essays} that “nobility adds majesty to a monarch, but diminishes power.”\textsuperscript{48} Skinner reminds us that one possibility is that “the meaning of the term is given by the fact that it was used to refer to a particularly prized moral quality.” “Or, equally properly,” Skinner says, one

\textsuperscript{46} Id.
\textsuperscript{47} Id., (emphasis added).
might “point out that the same term was also used to denote membership of a particular social class.” Thus “[i]t might not in practice be clear which meaning we are to understand in a given case.” And in Bacon’s case, “we might, remembering his admiration for Machiavelli, think of the first meaning as readily as we might, remembering his official position, think of the second.”

Indeed, Skinner hastens to add that a “further problem, moreover, is raised by the fact that this ambiguity sometimes seems to have been used by Renaissance moralists in a studied way.” Some used it in an attempt to show that “one might have noble qualities even if one lacked noble birth,” while others tried to show that “while nobility is a matter of attainment, it happens to be invariably connected with nobility of birth,” a “possibility” that “was understandably even more commonly pointed out.”

From this Skinner concludes, like Strauss, that “if we wish to understand a given idea…we cannot simply concentrate, a la Lovejoy, on studying the forms of words involved” because “the words denoting the idea may be used, as the example indicates, with varying and quite incompatible intentions.” Skinner notes that “[w]e cannot even hope that a sense of the context of utterance will necessarily resolve this problem.”

(This, it may be noted, is a readier abandonment of intra-textual context than Strauss was prepared to make, who admonishes us that the “context in which a statement occurs, and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood

49 Id.
50 Id.
51 Id.
52 Id., p. 55.
before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct.”

In these respects, Strauss and Skinner are generally in agreement. However, Skinner wants us to avoid “looking for the ‘essential meaning’ of the ‘idea’ as something which must necessarily ‘remain the same.’” Skinner, quite properly and conscientiously, wants us to avoid mistakenly imputing meaning to a term by assuming that meaning remains stable over time. I think Strauss would have been quite receptive to this injunction. But he would at the same time have liked to leave open the possibility that words may, indeed, retain their meaning across contexts that may be extremely various – though whether Strauss anticipates this possibility owing to some variant of the essentialism Skinner abhors or due to chance historical congruences of thought, is unclear. Strauss would like to escape the principle that rules out any “interpretation of an author which cannot be literally translated into his language, and which was not used by him or was not in fairly common use in his time,” precisely because the important thing – the esoteric teaching – is occurring between the lines.54

In this regard, Skinner and Strauss are practically of a piece, recognizing that in many cases the text itself, and even its context, is not its own guide. Strauss would certainly endorse the exhortation to “study all the various situations, which may change in complex ways, in which the given form of words can logically be used – all the

53 Strauss, Persecution, p. 30 (emphasis added).
functions the words can serve, all the various things that can be done with them.”55 “One of these possibilities,” Strauss would add, is “that the passage may be ironic.”56

**Esotericism is Coherentist**

We contend that Strauss’s esoteric approach, abstracted from his particular interpretations, is *coherentist* within the meaning of that term among those who study coherence in legal and other argumentation. “Deliberation, the search for coherence, is a kind of self-interpretation”57 and a “kind of theoretical activity that aims at coherence.”58 Hence deliberation aims at justifying an act or decision so that it aligns as much as possible with Tradition. For “a coherence account holds that practical judgments about what should be done, all things considered, are responsible to theory,”59 though “theory” here is replaced by shared norms and traditions *internal* to politics.

One of Strauss’s most important working assumptions is, “[i]n a word,” that “one cannot take seriously enough the law of logographic necessity.”60 According to Strauss, “[n]othing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs,” and here is the clearest statement for our purpose, “[e]verything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue.”61 He says this with respect to the Platonic dialogues, but later in general (while discussing

61 Id.
Machiavelli’s *Discourses*). According to Strauss, the “perfect book or speech obeys in every respect the pure and merciless laws of what has been called logographic necessity.” As such, the “perfect speech contains nothing slipshod; in it there are no loose threads; it contains no word that has been picked up at random; it is not marred by errors due to faulty memory or to any other kind of carelessness.”

It is worth noting that this more radical assumption of perfect speech differs from Strauss’s earlier formulation in *Persecution* that “even Homer nods,” that perhaps even some esoterically written texts contain errors we may disregard. But even at the time of *Persecution*, Strauss was elsewhere rejecting the notion that, for instance, “we ought to allow for the possibility that unconscious and unintentional contradictions have crept into the Guide” and answering critics by “referring to Maimonides’ emphatic declaration concerning the extreme care with which he had written every single word of his book and by asking the objectors to produce similar declarations from those books of other philosophers which they may have in mind.” Of course the Platonic dialogues do not contain a similar authorial statements, except by the courtesy of its place in literary history, nor do Machiavelli’s works (the closest in Machiavelli are statements in the epistles dedicatory to The Prince and The Discourses that they contain “everything he

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knows,” remarks that Strauss makes much of). Yet Strauss applies the assumption of perfect speech across the board.

This works together with another of Strauss’s rules of thumb, which is that an author may “assert[] explicitly on every page of his book that \(a\) is \(b\), but indicate[] between the lines that \(a\) is not \(b\).” Now Strauss observes that a “modern historian” who is concerned with the matter of the author’s intentionality “will still demand explicit evidence” that a contradiction exists between the lines. Obviously, Strauss admits, “[s]uch evidence cannot possibly be forthcoming.” Thus Strauss for his part basically eschews the evidentiary issue, even though he constantly maintains that his readings are more faithful to the author’s intention than non-esoteric interpretations.

Strauss’s restatement of this rule of thumb in the context of an interpretation of Maimonides is particularly useful for our purposes. After stating his working assumption that the *Guide* is an example of “perfect speech,” Strauss asserts that “Maimonides deliberately contradicts himself, and if a man declares that both \(a\) is \(b\) and that \(a\) is not \(b\), he cannot be said to declare anything.” Quite right, of course. The contradictory statements would seem to cancel each other out. Now if we assume that one is exoteric and false, while another is esoteric and true, how do we determine which is which? Strauss’s answer, another rule of thumb, is that “of two contradictory statements in the

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66 Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 27.
67 Id.
68 Id.
Guide or in any other work of Maimonides, that statement which occurs least frequently,
or even which occurs only once, was considered by him to be true.”70 For example,
suppose one were to write a tract explicitly supportive of deliberative democracy, but
which expressed – only once, hypothetically and in passing – grave doubts about the
viability of deliberation or democracy. According to this rule of thumb, such doubt
would have to be taken as the text’s “true” view, especially where the same text had
indicated “that he did not object to telling lies which were noble”71 and recognized “the
virtues of mendacity.” From the perspective of esoteric reading, the rule makes sense: for
if an author felt the need to dissemble and to indicate her true views only between the
lines and through the device of deliberate contradiction, it is unlikely that she would
indicate her true position through the majority of her statements rather than through the
minority. For if the majority of her statements were consistent with her true views, why
conceal them in the first place? Would her views not then be relatively unobscured by
the exoteric mask? Such an example would seem to be poor execution of esoteric
writing, although it is possible that this example would fit among the “modern
philosophers” of whom Strauss says that it is “comparatively easy to read between the
lines of their books.”72 For “[t]hey concealed their views only far enough to protect
themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that,

70 Strauss, “Literary Character,” p. 73.
71 Strauss, Persecution, p. 35.
72 Id., p. 34.
they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of people who were not potential philosophers.”

Thus Strauss’s rule of thumb that, among two sets of contradictory statements or positions, the rarer one is the true or esoteric teaching, may apply in Maimonides’ case but not necessarily among modern philosophers. For our purposes, it is enough to observe that, among two sets of contradictory statements or positions, one of these is to be regarded as the true position and the other rejected.

**Applying a Liberal Esotericism to the Text of Tradition**

Now suppose we apply this approach to our shared norms and attempt to read between the lines of the text of Tradition. We cannot help but notice that Tradition is by its social nature “complex” and “multivalent.” An esoteric reading of Tradition would stand for the principle that minor narratives, though frequently disavowed and existing “between the lines” of official discourse, actually constitute the true reading of the “text.” It should serve the cause of recognition for groups marginalized by dominant themes of discourse. For example, the cause of feminism and of gay rights would have received greater and more rapid articulation under an esoteric reading of tradition. It is a bit like Zizek’s notion referred to in Chapter Three that every institution assumes transgression of its own rules in order to function. The esoteric approach to interpretation elevates the transgressive discourse over the rule.

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73 Id.
The problem with this hermeneutical approach vis-à-vis our aim of preserving minority voices is twofold: first, an esoteric reading privileges minorities simply and is agnostic as to their character. What is to prevent us from elevating minority narratives that exist in Tradition but are in tension with democratic goals? Surely, various kinds of authoritarianism or bigotry will be a part of virtually any political Tradition. Applying esotericism alone, we are in danger of deliberating ourselves out of democracy and into the rule of the few.

Second, there is the problem of instability. For if we privilege minority discourse, at what point does the formerly prevailing discourse become itself marginalized and, under the principle of esotericism, itself replace the regnant (formerly marginalized) discourse all over again? We would seem to be faced with an endless cycle of this kind.

To avoid these two dilemmas, any esoteric reading of Tradition would have to limit itself by some principle of liberalism, according to which no minority discourse would be recognized that is hostile to the equal rights of all. In effect, such a liberal esotericism would exclude, in a manner similar to the positive side of political correctness, all discourses (racist, sexist, etc.) contrary to liberal aims, while bringing to the surface unrecognized aspects of Tradition and latent grievances.

**Psychoanalytic Interpretation: Deliberation as Resolving Psychic Conflict**

Psychoanalysis may present a second model for reading between the lines of Tradition, through a hermeneutics of suspicion. Jung has certainly given us reason to imagine that Tradition contains dormant material with his notion of the “collective unconscious” and the shared archetypes that exist through this “second psychic system of
a collective…and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals” and “is inherited.” Whatever the empirical validity of Jung’s notion, we might agree less controversially that, if we are formed by Tradition, we are scarcely conscious of its totality. In that sense, Tradition has a side that is suppressed or hidden from view.

Suppose that a pathological discourse, one that prominently features hegemonic or exclusionary narratives, say – is like the neurotic mind. Many narratives contend, but the pathological or hegemonic narrative (perhaps one of racial or class superiority) features prominently. According to Freud, the mind is “determined by a compromise between the different psychic powers which come into conflict with one another when repressions occur.” Neurosis arises from a “conflict” among the “psychic powers” and is in fact the “symptom” that results from the compromise. Hence, the “conflict” neuroses are conditions caused by a conflict between the (sexual and/or aggressive) drives and desires of the Id, and the strictures of a punishing Superego. For example, perhaps a moralizing political group or discourse (e.g., proffered by political actors injecting religious justifications into politics) corresponding to the Superego, and a more permissive discourse corresponding to the Id (e.g., groups favoring measures disapproved by the Superego discourse, such as coverage for birth control in employer-provided insurance plans under the Affordable Care Act). Set in the midst of these warring factions, the Ego (the polity itself) has either to live with the grief of a finger-wagging

77 Letters to Fliess, p. 75.
Superego, or must defensively repress the drives of the Id. A conflict ensues among the discourses, and when the Id and the Superego reach a pathological compromise, political neurosis emerges.

Of course, more current psychodynamic theory holds that “every mental event is a compromise formation made up of wishes, defenses, and self-punishments,” corresponding to the convictions of the id and superego. Hence theorists like Charles Brenner have distinguished between “normal” and “pathological” compromise formations on the basis of the “degree of pain and inhibition the individual suffers.” Through psychoanalysis, the patient seeks “an alteration that results in a normal compromise formation in place of a pathological one that was formerly present.” In terms more familiar to those for whom psychoanalysis is synonymous with Freud, the aim is to “make the unconscious conscious” (an aim that makes best sense in the context of the topographical model, wherein we can imagine psychic material rising into consciousness). And in terms of the later model, Freud’s famous dictum: “where id was, there shall ego be” – together with the rest of the passage, not usually quoted, describing psychoanalysis as “a work of culture – not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee.”

83 Id.
This work of culture, applied to deliberation, amounts to the surfacing of hitherto neglected aspects of Tradition. Suppose that, through a reading of Tradition inspired by psychoanalysis, the conflict between the hegemonic or moralizing discourse and the permissive discourse is brought to the surface. How would a psychoanalytically-inspired hermeneutics adjudicate among them?

The psychoanalytic approach contains a built-in principle for resolving “pathological compromises,” namely by determining the “degree of pain and inhibition the individual suffers” as a result of the compromise among impulses.84 In a conflict over access to birth control coverage under the Affordable Care Act, to take a recent controversy, the relevant question is what compromise would cause more pain and inhibition to the individual? By analogizing some aspects of the Tradition to the wishes of the Id, there is a basis for preserving the voice and rights of minorities in deliberation. Of course the “repressed” impulse of Tradition could just as easily be the thing that should prevail when resolving a pathological compromise among impulses in favor of the compromise that causes the least “pain and inhibition” in the individual. Where the wishes of the Id pose no threat to the Ego (the democratic polity), there is no basis for their continued repression by a punishing Superego. In the cases of women’s rights, and of gay rights for example, that sort of argument might be made. For the “degree of pain and inhibition” that individuals suffer as a result of repression in these cases is much worse than as a result of free action; those proffering a moralizing discourse suffer in a

“permissive” compromise, which consists basically in their suffering offense at the non-acceptance of their views. Indeed, as the line of cases terminating in the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage have shown, it was very difficult for opponents to make out a case for “harm” to others caused by the recognition of such marriages, other than the offense given to their religious or idiosyncratic beliefs.

For these reasons, a psychoanalytic reading of Tradition would seem to lead to interpretations that bring latent discourses to the surface, and ensure that minority rights are not repressed in deliberation by the formation of pathological consensus.

Conclusion

The foregoing sketches, we hope, go some distance toward indicating how methodologies of the hermeneutics of suspicion might develop. Such methodologies should serve as canons of construction for those wishing to construe Tradition in a manner favorable to repressed minorities. Even if not fully determinative, as (if Kant is right) no methodological principles can be, such canons do place a thumb on the scale in the direction of hoped for outcomes.

In earlier chapters, we concerned ourselves with certain pathologies of political judgment which, we argued, pose major obstacles to democratic deliberation. We embarked on this investigation with the conviction that “what is needed” is an effort to distinguish “healthy from corrupt forms of political rhetoric.”85 This we sought to do first of all by identifying two pathologies – political narcissism and ressentiment – that

tend to encourage anti-deliberative rhetoric, indeed, that in our view preclude genuine
deliberation altogether. For, as deliberative theorists have noted, “[p]sychological
barriers to deliberation are especially powerful in conflicted societies” and “if parties do
not trust and respect each other, if they lack motivation, if they do not perceive a common
ground…then deliberation may fail even in the most ideal institutional settings.” 86
Accordingly, we sought to identify and to suggest remedies for two psychological
barriers to deliberation, which we construed as pathologies of political judgment that
undermine precisely the “trust and respect” necessary to deliberation.

Initially, in Chapter 1, we reviewed current theorizing about deliberative
democracy. Noting the frustration of theorists in often failing to achieve anything worthy
of the name “deliberation,” we pointed out the almost exclusive focus of the literature in
setting forth the conditions for deliberation. We indicated that the literature has “largely
neglected what it is that deliberation actually does,”87 and that more theorizing needs to
be done in this direction. This is particularly the case in light of the fact that not only
does fostering deliberation within clearly divided societies remain quite a puzzle for
deliberative theory, but also given that addressing the problems of comparatively healthy
Western democracies (e.g., dealing with corrupt rhetoric or the refusal of political actors
even to listen to each other) remains a problem for the literature. Endlessly specifying
the initial conditions in which hypothetical deliberation should flourish, we thought, has

86 Anastasiya Salnykova, “Barriers to Inter-Group Deliberation in Divided Ukraine,” in Ugarriza and
Caluwaerts ed., Democratic Deliberation in Deeply Divided Societies: From Conflict to Common Ground
87 Darren R. Walhof, “Bringing the Deliberative Back In: Gadamer on Conversation and Understanding,”
not been of much help. We observed first of all that the extant modes of political judgment being brought to bear in deliberative discourse – namely phronesis and critique – while valuable in themselves, have pathological or corrupt versions that highlight the need for additional approaches. We suggested that political narcissism or grandiosity (investigated in Chapter 2) corresponded to a pathological version of phronesis, where there is “no such thing as the ‘application of a rule’” or shared norm “because the instance of application becomes part of the rule itself”\(^{88}\) and hence judgment is rendered entirely idiosyncratic to the political actor and gathered into his hands. We suggested also that the phenomenon of ressentiment (explored in Chapter 3) corresponded to a pathological version of critique, where the aim is no longer genuine social criticism but becomes a vengeful tearing down of institutions and opponents. We therefore called for an additional model in the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion” (in Chapter 4) to assist political actors in the interpretive work necessary to understand one another and actually carry out the work of deliberation.

Thus in Chapter 2, we examined political narcissism, wherein political actors adopt a grandiose self-image and thus devalue the Other. The result is that fellow members of the polity, potential participants in a deliberation, are not taken seriously (indeed, denigrated), and hence the value of respect is absent. We agreed with Gutmann and Thompson that “moral accommodation” is premised “on a value that lies at the core of reciprocity and deliberation in a democracy,” namely “mutual respect,” a value that

“demands more than toleration” and “requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees.”\textsuperscript{89} Wherever political narcissism prevails, deliberation is impossible, for mutual respect is lacking, and the pretense to legitimacy is monopolized by a single actor. In an effort to resolve this pathology and clear an obstacle from the path to deliberation, we pursued an analogy from the psychoanalytic tradition. We suggested that political narcissism is basically analogous and coextensive, at the political level, with narcissistic personality disorders or so-called disorders of the self, at the level of the individual psyche. Hence we embarked on an investigation of the ‘self psychology’ of Heinz Kohut and sought a cure in a political analogue to Kohut’s empathy. We concluded that those who are least likely to listen in a democracy, political narcissists, lacked the political equivalent of parental mirroring and at some point in their history felt not only excluded from the political discourse but voiceless. We therefore proposed, following Kohut, that precisely these political actors need to be radically listened to, and should be the recipients of our best efforts to empathize, in the hope that they will over time develop the political analogue of “psychic structure” and internalize the values of respect and reciprocity.

In Chapter 3, we identified the phenomenon of \textit{ressentiment}, wherein “weak” or marginal political actors, unable to express their political grievances, are forced through some exigency to occupy a position of social or political subservience, and consequently develop hostility toward the values dear to those they see as their oppressors. For

\textsuperscript{89} Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, \textit{Democracy and Disagreement} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 79.
example, certain forms of populist hatred of the rich or “class warfare” can be understood as *ressentiment*, as might certain radical forms of feminism or racial separation (though anti-feminist and other reactionary movements, for example, could be understood in the same terms just as easily). As Scheler maintained, “*ressentiment* must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.”

Hence, those afflicted with *ressentiment* not only lack the “trust” necessary to deliberation, but are engulfed in a hostility to other political actors. Again, in an effort to address this problem, we explored Nietzsche’s notion of the agon and suggested that its very structure might be therapeutic for *ressentiment* attitudes. We sought a cure for this malady by setting free the aggressive impulses within the context of a transitional, and hopefully transformative, political agonism.

In Chapter 4, we advanced a model of psychoanalysis as a viable one for achieving a deeper understanding of our deliberative interlocutors, and so for carrying out better informed and more successful dialogues with them. We considered the implications of the Habermas-Gadamer debate for our attempts to understand our interlocutors, and concluded that even Gadamerian hermeneutics does not preclude new insights as a result of the deliberative encounter. On that basis, we suggested a psychoanalytically informed approach to deliberation, that seeks deeper understanding of

our interlocutors and communicates with in the light of that understanding. Thus, since we held that psychoanalysis “aims at helping the individual become autonomous, that is, capable of self-reflective activity and deliberation,” we concluded that a psychoanalytically informed approach to deliberation “can produce better selves” and increase the likelihood of deliberative success. And in the present chapter, we outlined the beginnings of the way a hermeneutics of suspicion might be applied not only toward understanding one another but to reading the text of Tradition and deliberating on that basis.

In sum, by drawing attention to the psychological character of communicative action, we hope to have contributed to the clearing of some brush from the path to deliberation, and to have suggested that mutual understanding must precede mutual respect.

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Biography

Raymond Alexander Mercado was born July 3, 1985, in San Diego, CA. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of San Diego in 2007, with a major in political science and minor in history. While in graduate school at Duke, he was a Research Scholar at Duke’s Center for European Studies.