

# **Impassioned Democracy:** The Role of Emotion in Deliberative Theory

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## I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

For a deliberative democrat, the antonym of reason is not emotion, but rather power. Exploiting dogma, structural advantage, ignorance, and arbitrary authority are contrary to practical reason in this relevant sense. Emotion, in itself, is not at all contrary. From this perspective, those who rely on an ordinary-language reading to contrast emotion with reason will be systematically misled when they investigate how these concepts are deployed in democratic theory. Contrary to many critics, far from denigrating emotion, deliberative democratic theory has, from its beginnings, given emotion an indispensable role in its conception of practical reason. However, emotion's theoretical role needs much more, and much more systematic, elaboration. Even more important, we need a discussion of how various emotions will play out in implementing real deliberative institutions.

## II. Habermas's Theory

Jürgen Habermas's systematic philosophy has been described as pushing forward on "the unfinished project of enlightenment." As such, he is a self-conscious inheritor of the Western tradition that the new emotion research claims ignores or denigrates the emotions. Indeed, Habermas has been accused of ignoring and denigrating the emotions himself.<sup>2</sup> The charge that Habermas is himself a hyper-rationalist is often taken as a decisive blow against

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<sup>2</sup> See Mouffe (1999), Johnson (1998), Sanders (1997), Bertram (1997), Young (1996), Dean (1995) and Post (1993). For a revisionist history, see Neblo (2005). For an account of how emotion can figure in to the concept of good deliberation, see Bachtiger et. al. (2009), Neblo (2007a), and Neblo (2007b).

his version of deliberative democratic theory. However, this accusation of anti-emotion bias is straightforwardly false.

Let us begin with the central theme of his philosophical project. Habermas has stridently criticized:

“certain one-sided conceptions characteristic of the modern understanding of the world, notably its stubborn tendency to narrow down to the cognitive-instrumental domain the domain of questions that can be decided on the basis of reasons. Moral-practical questions of the form What ought I to do? are considered not amenable to rational debate unless they can be answered in terms of purposive rationality. This pathology of modern consciousness calls for an explanation in terms of social theory.” (“Discourse Ethics” p. 45)

Now this passage might seem to confirm the old criticism of hyper-rationalism at the expense of the emotions. After all Habermas is trying to put moral questions back into the realm of *reason*. However, later we find out that the cardinal faulty belief supporting the instrumentalist hegemony is that emotions are radically distinct from reason, and therefore cannot be taken as anything but brute facts. Habermas’s position here comports quite well with the theory of affective intelligence. Thus, analyzing how humans actually experience making practical decisions<sup>3</sup> is important because:

“it shows that the world of moral phenomena can be grasped only in the performative attitude of participants in interaction, that resentment and personal emotional responses in general point to suprapersonal standards for judging norms and commands, and that the moral-practical justification of a

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<sup>3</sup> “Practical decisions” and moral phenomena have to be understood here as coextensive, as in “practical reason.” Thus they cover answering all manner of questions about what we should do: for example, “which candidate should we vote for,” and all of the other phenomena that Marcus et. al. discuss.

mode of action aims at an aspect *different* from the *feeling-neutral* assessment of means-ends relations, even when such assessment is made from the point of view of the general welfare<sup>4</sup>...Feelings seem to have a similar function for the moral justification of action as sense perceptions have for the theoretical justification of facts.” (“Discourse Ethics” p. 50)

The first point about the performative attitude argues that normative decisions proceed from lived experience (including our emotional life) and cannot be adequately grasped via an abstract conception of rationality alone. The second point about emotions and suprapersonal standards for judging norms is claiming that our emotions function by interacting with reason as it is socially constituted. The third point is that economic conceptions of rationality, which take emotions as mere givens, do not do justice to their role *even if* we expand our notions of self-interest to include altruistic motives.

Now let’s pause and consider in some depth Habermas’s last, and most important, point in this passage. Habermas has put this claim more clearly and succinctly in analogical form: “*Emotion is to practical reason as sense perception is to scientific reason.*”<sup>5</sup> If we stop and think about where science would be without recourse to sense perception, it becomes obvious that it is decisively false to claim that Habermas’s discourse theory makes no room for the emotions, or even that they play a marginal role. Whatever one thinks of the ultimate adequacy of his formulation, it creates an enormous and absolutely essential role for affective intelligence in his theoretical system.

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<sup>4</sup> Italics in the original. [Discuss Hirschman’s argument to the effect that greed used to be considered an emotion, and now, in one relevant sense it has become part of the definition of rationality.]

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication.

The opposite view is based on an understandably common caricature. The misconception is understandable because it is true that Habermas has not developed the implications of his theory of the emotions with the same systematic rigor of other key concepts. We are left to piece together the various strands, and it is notoriously difficult to keep pace with his output and evolving views.<sup>6</sup> So, let us resume piecing together more strands of his theory.

In addition to providing the “raw data” for practical reason, emotions can also function sometimes as judgments themselves:

“When we examine moral disagreements, we must include affective reactions in the class of moral utterances...The critical and self-critical stances we adopt toward transgressions find expression in affective attitudes: from the third person perspective, abhorrence, indignation, and contempt, from the perspective of those affected, in feelings of violation or resentment...and from the first person perspective, in shame and guilt. To these correspond the positive emotional reactions of admiration, loyalty, gratitude, etc. Because they express implicit judgments, these feelings in which actors express their pro and con attitudes are correlated with evaluations...The claim that moral judgments admit of justification also reveals itself in these moral feelings and evaluations, for they differ from other feelings and evaluations in being tied to obligations that function as reasons.” (“A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality” p. 4-5)

An alternative way of putting Habermas’s argument here is that emotions interact with reason as outputs and analogues to reason, in addition to the input role mentioned above.

Habermas makes it clear that such cooperation is not merely contingent. That is, his seemingly one-sided conception of justice is *internally* related to our emotional capacities.

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<sup>6</sup> Note, however, that the passages above were written twenty years ago, so his theory of the emotions is not some sudden reversal or add-on.

He claims that “Justice conceived deontologically requires solidarity as its reverse side.” (“Justice and Solidarity” p. 244) While “solidarity” does not have a very emotional connotation in English, Habermas clearly wants to suggest one. First, he claims that solidarity issues from empathy,<sup>7</sup> which has obvious emotional connotations. Second, he uses the simple cognate “solidarität” interchangeably with the phrase “eine solidarische Einfühlung,” – i.e., a solidaristic empathy (literally “a solidaristic projection-into” the thoughts and feelings of the other). Finally, in another passage with a similar formulation he makes the emotional connection explicit:

“Solidarity and justice are two sides of the same coin; hence, the ethics of *compassion* does not dispute the legitimacy of the morality of justice but merely frees it from the rigidity of the ethics of conscience.” (“Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer” p. 134)<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in a surprising result, Habermas concludes that discourse ethics is not an *alternative* to a more particularistic ethics (associated with the emotions), but rather includes such concerns within its structure:

“The cognitive operations [that ideal role taking] requires are demanding. Those operations in turn are internally linked with motives and emotional dispositions and attitudes like empathy...Similar connections among cognition, empathy, and *agape* can be shown to hold for the hermeneutic activity of applying universal norms in a context-sensitive manner. This integration of cognitive operations and emotional dispositions...characterizes the *mature* capacity for moral judgment...This conception of maturity, however, should *not* be applied...in the form of an opposition between an ethics of love and an

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<sup>7</sup> Habermas (1992).

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis mine.

ethics of law and justice.” (Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action  
p. 182)<sup>9</sup>

So in addition to the three functions for emotion described in the earlier passages, we can add emotion as an enabling condition for role-taking (a key feature in his applied ethics), and emotion as a necessary ingredient during the “application” stage of discourse theory. Habermas has identified five roles for emotion in deliberation; however there are several more which must play important roles in deliberative theory. Our picture of the role of emotion in democratic deliberation cannot be comprehensive without further elaboration of these roles. Habermas’ five roles are an important start, but they need to be elaborated and systematized. Further, I believe there is reason to think that more roles for emotion in democratic deliberation lie yet to be explored.

## *II. A System of Roles for Emotion in Deliberative Theory*

The twelve roles outlined below represent a sketch for a more comprehensive theory of how emotion should operate within a conception of deliberative politics that does justice to the full array of human faculties. Such a theory implies an empirical research agenda to examine if and how such roles are actually fulfilled under various forms of real deliberation.

*Role #1: Normative Relevance*      Emotion is indispensable in helping us to even identify a situation as normatively relevant in the first place. This idea harkens back to Kant’s discussion of “fine feeling” being a pre-requisite for the empathic recognition of another’s

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis in the original.

need. As a corollary, this role also helps us determine the scope of deliberation by delimiting the realm of that which is morally relevant for a given purpose.<sup>10</sup>

*Role #2: Motivation to Deliberate* The same emotions that help us to identify normatively relevant situations also provide the motivation to engage in discourse about them. I do not wish to claim that practical reason is motivationally inert. Again, we can look to Kant and other thinkers for the idea that emotion is at least a useful supplement, and perhaps a necessary or primary ingredient in motivating moral reflection.

*Role #3: Inputs* Once discourse has begun, our emotions provide the initial input, or “moral data” so to speak. If our emotions are carriers of implicit moral judgments, discourse proceeds by trying to translate those judgments into explicit propositional form so that they can be critically evaluated and brought to bear on the justification of candidate norms.

*Role #4: Outputs* Emotion is also an *output* of this translation process in that a given translation will produce emotional reactions that will serve as part of how we assess the adequacy of some proposed translation from moral phenomenology into the form of explicit moral propositions.

*Role #5: Unmediated Inputs* Emotions can also serve as *untranslated* inputs into deliberation. For example, for some purposes, it may not be necessary to render a parent’s love for his or her child into propositional form. We might reasonably judge that it is a valid consideration just as an emotion – i.e., independent of any propositional content (which is not

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<sup>10</sup> Vetlesen (1994) discusses the role of emotion in moral perception at length. On the potential for negative moral perception via the emotions see Neblo (2004), Neblo (2009a), Neblo (2009b), and Ramakrishnan et. al. (2010).



to deny that such emotions have any propositional content that might be considered under Role #3).<sup>11</sup>

*Role #6: Background*      We rely on various emotions (especially enthusiasm and anxiety) to manage the background against which deliberation makes sense. That is, not all potentially controversial questions can be thematized simultaneously. We rely on the life-world (as a set of implicit roles, expectations, and norms) to provide the context against which meaningful deliberation can orient itself. Most elements of the life-world are encoded and managed emotionally (e.g., the habits regulated by the disposition system). I include under this role, emotional cues about different aspects of the life-world that only become thematized *in the course of* deliberation. Such a process would at least partly be managed by the surveillance system.

*Role #7: Enabling Conditions*      Empathy and other emotions are enabling conditions for practical reason in that they are the basic means by which we can engage in reciprocal role-taking during deliberation. Such universal role-taking is the key distinguishing feature of Habermas's version of deliberative democracy. Rather than stripping ourselves of being situated and embodied subjects to reach a "view from nowhere," discourse theory enjoins us to do exactly the opposite – we empathically project ourselves into the perspective of the other. This moment of discourse bears an overlooked similarity to

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<sup>11</sup> The idea here is akin to Bernard Williams's example of a parent deliberating over whether to save her own child, or to randomize among all the children at risk. Williams's insight is that, in a sense, the latter constitutes "one thought too many." There may also be cases where we respect the authenticity of an individual's emotion without having to understand why he feels so or whether the emotion is correct by some external standard. Such untranslated emotions are distinguishable from those under Role #6 (below) by being direct considerations for the norm under review rather serving as background against which the whole process can become meaningful.

certain aspects of care ethics, and it is emotional engagement, rather than emotional detachment, that makes this possible.

*Role #8: Cross Check*      Once we have come to a preliminary conclusion in deliberation, emotion helps us to check the process: does the norm “feel right” or are we anxious or annoyed or unhappy about the outcome? If it does not feel right, then we have a *prima facie* reason to think that we may have taken a misstep in the process, or that deliberation was not conducted in a fair way. As a result, we might engage in a variation on reflective equilibrium in which we move back and forth between moral data, rational deliberation, and an affective assessment of the products of deliberation, trying to bring them into line with each other.<sup>12</sup>

*Role #9: Analogs*      Once we have found justified norms, our emotions serve as affective summaries of our relationship to the whole process. For example, the propensity to feel shame after violating some norm is the practical representation of or analogue for rationally motivated acceptance of a norm. This mode of representing such a process is the moral counterpart to “On-Line” models of political cognition.

*Role #10: Application*      Emotions are necessary for context sensitive *application* of norms. Habermas divides discourse theory into two moments: justification and application. The idea here is that if we have a set of previously justified abstract norms, when we are faced with real life problems, we must determine which norms apply and how they interact.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The contribution of emotion under Role #8 is distinguishable from Role #4 in that the former apply to norms after deliberation has reached a preliminary conclusion, while the latter apply to translations which are at the core of the primary deliberative process itself.

<sup>13</sup> The two stages are somewhat analogous to first crafting legislation and then adjudicating court cases.

Doing so requires responsiveness to a rich social context of roles, relationships, and expectations, much of which must be grasped intuitively through emotional sensitivity.

*Role #11: Motivation to Act* In an applied, rather than a theoretical sense, emotions will play an important motivational role to *act on norms* even if participants have assented to them in deliberation. Again, the point is not to deny practical reason any independent motivational force. Habermas famously argues otherwise when he claims that the moral skeptic falls into performative contradiction as soon as he opens his mouth. However, this argument is really only effective at the level of philosophical analysis. That is, it only touches actions on the ground (i.e., is *causally* effective) if the hypothetical egoist cares about thinking himself rational. Though Habermas does not make this role for emotion explicit, it might be part of what he means by saying that the life-world has to “meet discourse theory halfway.” It is emotion’s role to motivate people in the causal sense toward action, rather than the conceptual sense toward valid belief about justification (which in my view is the only effective target of the argument from performative contradiction).

*Role #12: Struggles for Recognition* Finally, emotion has an important role to play when deliberation fails. If deliberation is either openly exclusionary or subtly power laden (and thus unsatisfying) people or groups so disadvantaged can engage in what Habermas calls “struggles for recognition.” Within this general role, emotion can serve three sub-roles. First, it can serve as a signal to the excluded or oppressed groups that they have a claim (e.g., via feelings of righteous indignation) rather than passively accepting some legitimating ideology. Second, emotionally charged protest can serve as a disruptive force to the status quo, grabbing people’s attention and signaling that institutionalized processes might be missing something. (This effect is something like tripping a surveillance system writ

large.) Finally, emotion can serve as the means by which the oppressor gains access to the need for recognizing the oppressed (which is somewhat related to roles #1 and #7).

These roles cohere theoretically, but there is virtually no empirical work which bears on whether they will prove viable in the context of real deliberation. I have conducted a pilot study which sought to take a first cut at whether and how emotion functions in deliberation, but at a *very* undifferentiated level relative to the roles described above. Although it is a useful preview of my general approach to such questions, the small sample size, inadequate controls, and incomplete data analysis severely limit the range and reliability of my findings. Nevertheless, the preliminary results from this pilot suggest that emotion *is* a measurable factor in actual deliberation, and that more and better tailored research will likely yield interesting results.

### *III. Conclusion*

Despite claims to the contrary, deliberative democracy has never conceived of reason and emotion as incompatible. For that matter, the Western tradition's denigration of emotions *per se* has been overstated. So far from eschewing all emotion as the bane of reason, most Western thinkers embraced it as a necessary and worthy facet of human existence. Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen's contributions in *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* are of enormous importance, especially in their analysis of emotion's role in voting behavior. However, paradoxically, they limit the relevance and fecundity of their findings by portraying their work as a radical break from the Western tradition. Emotion both informs and is informed by reason, as Habermas and others have pointed out. Far from excluding emotion from deliberative theory, I have identified no less than twelve distinct roles emotion should

play in deliberation. These roles derive, in some cases, from insights afforded by Western thinkers in exactly the capacity that Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen deny is possible. The real enemy of reason, and thus of deliberation, is not emotion, but rather unlegitimated power, which disrupts the complicated interplay of reason and emotion. To a deliberative democrat, neither reason nor emotion can serve without the other.

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