

# Letter Impassioned Democracy: The Roles of Emotion in Deliberative Theory

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*In ordinary language, people often treat emotion as the opposite of reason. Deliberative democrats, however, typically use “reason” in a rather different way. They regard arbitrary power, not emotion, as the opposite of reason. Emotion, then, is not at all contrary to reason. Critics who rely on ordinary language to claim that deliberative democrats denigrate emotion are likely to misconstrue how both reason and emotion are deployed. In fact, most deliberative democrats have always assigned emotion an indispensable role in their theories. That said, emotion’s role in deliberation needs more, and more systematic, elaboration. I identify twelve distinct roles for emotion in deliberative theory and practice, clearing the way for a more fruitful research agenda on the role of emotion in democratic deliberation.*

In ordinary language people often treat emotion as the opposite of reason. For example, “Passion overwhelmed his reason, and thus he made a bad choice.” Deliberative democrats, however, typically use “reason” in a rather different way. They regard arbitrary power, not emotion, as the opposite of reason. For example, “Powerful interests overwhelmed the counsel of reasoned debate, and thus we made a bad choice.” Here, emotion is not at all contrary to reason. Thus, critics who rely on ordinary language to claim that deliberative democrats denigrate emotion are likely to misconstrue how both reason and emotion are deployed in such theories. Take, for example, the claim that “Requiring legitimate deliberation to be ‘reasoned’ . . . excludes the positive role of the emotions in deliberation (Mansbridge et al. 2006, 5).” Contrary to such claims, deliberative democrats have always assigned emotion an indispensable role in their theories. That said, emotion’s role in deliberation needs more, and more systematic, elaboration.

If I am counseling against ordinary language usage, then it behooves me to offer a more technical characterization of “emotion” as I intend it. Doing so is not without its own hazards, as specialists themselves disagree on many issues. So I will rely on a fairly general characterization that most theorists should find useful for present purposes: *Emotions are felt, situational evaluations that motivate action.*


Saying that emotions are “felt” indicates that they typically have an embodied component. We may not always be consciously aware of them, but we can usually be *made* aware of them by attending to our bodily reactions: upon seeing a bear charging at me, I feel my heart race. Saying that emotions are “situational” indicates that they are intentional; that is, they

take an object: I am afraid of the bear charging at me. Saying that emotions are “evaluative” indicates that they come with either a perceived (nonconceptual) or appraised (conceptual) valence: the charging bear appears to me as a fearful, threatening thing. Such evaluations may be justified (I perceive no obvious means of defense or escape) or unjustified (I know that there is a strong zoo barrier between us, but feel fear nonetheless). In addition, they may be correct (*in fact*, I have no means of defense or escape) or incorrect (this is actually a friendly, Narnian bear). Finally, saying that emotions “motivate” indicates that they potentiate corresponding behavior patterns: fearing the charging bear prepares me to fight or flee (even though I may have the wherewithal to override my fear and play dead).

Correspondingly, for the present purposes, (practical) *reasons are propositions that can serve as premises in inferences that justify action.* On this definition, reasons are conceptual and discursable (Brandom 1994). Following Scarantino and de Sousa (2018), I distinguish between the instrumental and cognitive rationality of emotions. Emotions are instrumentally rational when they promote behavior that advances the realization of a person’s preferences. Note that on this definition seemingly irrational emotions can be instrumentally rational. For example, I may find the dangerous bear adorable rather than fearful, but through this odd reaction I avoid provoking an attack by fleeing. The warm friendly emotions seem irrational to us because in a cognitive sense they are. The bear is actually dangerous, so emotions that do not represent that danger to us are substantively inapt.

## REASON AND EMOTION IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY

I pay special attention to Jürgen Habermas because he laid the theoretical foundations for deliberative democracy, but he has been accused of neglecting the emotions even more egregiously than other deliberative democrats do. For example, Young (1985) claims that “There is no place in [Habermas’s] conception of linguistic interaction for the feeling that accompanies

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and motivates all utterances” (73). Similarly, Sanders (1997) argues that “Unlike deliberation, the standard of testimony does not exclude positions if they are voiced in an immoderate or emotionally laden way” (372).

People often take this anti-emotion charge as a decisive blow. However, the accusation is demonstrably false. As Habermas puts it

[R]esentment and personal emotional responses in general point to suprapersonal standards for judging norms and commands, and the moral-practical justification of a mode of action aims at an aspect *different* from the *feeling-neutral* assessment of means-ends relations . . . . Feelings seem to have a similar function for the moral justification of action as sense perceptions have for the theoretical justification of facts (1990, 50).<sup>1</sup>

The first point about suprapersonal standards is claiming that emotions function by interacting with reason as it is socially constituted. The second point is that economic conceptions of rationality, which take emotions as given, do not do justice to their role in judgment.

Now consider Habermas’s last, and most important, point. He has put this claim more succinctly in analogical form: “*Emotion is to practical reason as sense perception is to scientific reason.*”<sup>2</sup> If we think about where science would be without recourse to sense perception, it becomes clear that it is decisively false to claim that Habermas’s 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 role for emotion in his moral psychology.<sup>3</sup>

Even before Habermas, the proto-deliberative democrat, John Dewey, made a similar point: “A person must feel the qualities of acts as one feels with the hands the qualities of roughness and smoothness in objects, *before* he has an inducement to deliberate or material with which to deliberate . . . . This fact explains the element of truth in the theories which insist that in their root and essence moral judgments are emotional rather than intellectual” (Dewey 1985 [1932], 269). Note that in addition to making the “materials with which to deliberate” argument akin to Habermas’s, Dewey adds emotions as “inducement[s] to deliberate.”

More recent deliberative theorists also weave emotions into their theoretical accounts. For example, Gutmann and Thompson (1998) argue that emotional appeals are often required for effective deliberation:

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Habermas’s construction of discourse ethics begins with an analysis of Strawson’s notion of reactive attitudes. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this connection.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>3</sup> The evidence that I present here draws on Habermas’s theory of moral discourse, which he distinguishes from his discourse theory of law and democracy. The argument here holds *a fortiori* in that Habermas only makes more room for the emotions in his political theory relative to his moral theory. Political discourse must be able to influence formal political institutions; however, a substantial literature suggests that relevant emotional appeals tends to be more influential than not (Brader 2005).

“Dispassionate argument that minimizes conflict is not always the best means of deliberation . . . . Matching reason to passion can often be [more effective]” (1990, 136). They view reciprocity and mutual respect as key features of deliberation. These two desiderata require perspective-taking and empathy, which are emotionally managed processes.

Krause (2011) makes a related point when she argues that empathy, contrary to its connotations of partiality, can actually improve deliberative impartiality by allowing us to access increasingly broader perspectives that we could otherwise not represent adequately to ourselves. In an underappreciated passage, Rawls makes a related point: “Justice as fairness is a theory of our moral sentiments as manifested by our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium” (1971, 104). In fact, we “cannot do away with the [moral sentiments] without at the same time dismantling the natural attitudes (428),” leading to the remarkable conclusion that “[T]he sense of justice is continuous with the love of mankind” (476).<sup>4</sup>

Given this litany of crucial roles that emotions play in deliberative theories, why is the contrary perception so widespread? First, the connection between deliberative theories and empirical studies of emotion in deliberation is remarkably underdeveloped. For example, the word “emotion” does not appear in a recent review article on experiments in democratic deliberation (Gastil 2018; though see Grönlund et al. 2017 and Morrell 2010). More fundamentally, the misconception about deliberative theory’s denigration of the emotions is understandable because deliberative theorists have not developed the implications of their views on the emotions with the same rigor of other key concepts. We are left to piece together the strands. In that spirit, I turn to articulating twelve distinct roles for the emotions in deliberation.

## ROLES FOR EMOTION IN DELIBERATIVE THEORY

Recall that my definition of emotion has three components: (1) *felt*, (2) *situational evaluations that* (3) *motivate action*. The twelve roles outlined below represent different facets and combinations of these three basic components, but the roles are nevertheless functionally distinct enough to fruitfully treat them separately, especially for purposes of connecting empirical research to their theoretical articulation.

*Role #1, Normative Relevance:* Emotion is indispensable in helping us to even identify a situation as normatively relevant in the first place. We are all faced with an overwhelming buzz of impressions, not all of which can even receive brief attention, much less

<sup>4</sup> I interpret Rawls’s notion of reflective equilibrium as, in one sense, primarily affective: reason mediating between our emotions as they function in roles #3 and #4 below. The early Rawls was more of a proto-deliberative democrat, the latent tendencies of which become more apparent in his later work on public reason.

reflective concern. This idea harkens back to Kant's discussion of "fine feeling" being a prerequisite for the empathic recognition of another's need (Rumsey 1989). For example, city dwellers may become inured to the suffering of the homeless by constant exposure. If we cease to be arrested by feelings of compassion, we may thereby cease to even see them as having a moral claim upon us. They become part of the mere background of urban life. 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. Vetlesen (1993) discusses the role of emotion in moral perception, concluding that the emotions are a precondition of moral performance.

*Role #2, Motivation to Deliberate:* The same emotions that help us identify normatively relevant situations also provide the motivation to engage in discourse about them. Theories of affective intelligence (e.g., Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000) show that anxiety, in particular, is crucial in motivating political deliberation. Our "surveillance system" monitors the environment for novel situations for which our settled habits of action appear inadequate. Feeling concern or anxiety, in turn, makes us more open to new information and persuasive appeals. For example, I may have had a stable party identification for years such that I did not really engage with the platforms of rival parties, but increasing anxiety about global climate change might eventually make me take the Green Party seriously.

*Role #3, Inputs:* Once deliberation has begun, our emotions provide the "normative data" so to speak. Deliberation proceeds by trying to translate emotional evaluations into explicit propositional form so that they can be critically evaluated. This is the sense in which Habermas claims that emotions are to morality as sense perceptions are to science. Johnson, Black, and Knobloch (2017) provide a vivid example from the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on mandatory minimum sentences for repeat drunk drivers. One participant related a harrowing account of being hit by an impaired driver and its aftermath. The panelists set about to translate this and other emotionally laden stories into reasons for and against mandatory minimums. The authors conclude that the Citizens' Initiative Review creates "important opportunities for advocates to give voice to the emotional underpinnings of certain policy decisions and for panelists to hear these concerns. But the structure, including its use of moderators and its goal orientation, ensures that panelists are not overwhelmed by such expressions and that they remain focused on developing comprehensive and well-reasoned statements with which members of the electorate can inform themselves" (2).

*Role #4, Outputs:* Emotion is also an *output* of this translation process in that a given translation will produce emotional reactions that serve as part of how we assess the adequacy of some proposed translation into the form of explicit moral propositions. As William James asks in *The Sentiment of Rationality*, how is someone

to recognize [a rational conclusion] for what it is, and not let it slip through ignorance? The only answer can be that

he will recognize its rationality as he recognizes everything else, by certain subjective marks with which it affects him. When he gets the marks, he may know that he has got the rationality. What, then, are the marks? A strong feeling of ease, peace, rest, is one of them. The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension is full of lively relief and pleasure (1956, 63).

James's description here anticipates the theory of affective intelligence's (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000) notion of the "disposition system," which regulates the way that we recognize new solutions to problems and lay down new habits when anxiety is replaced by enthusiasm.

*Role #5, Unmediated Inputs:* Emotions can also serve as *untranslated* inputs into deliberation. Recall that we defined reasons as propositions that can serve as premises in inferences that justify action. This role holds open the possibility that emotions may serve as premises that justify action *without* being rendered in propositional form. Williams (1981) famously argued that if someone has to think about saving their own spouse from drowning versus another, this person has probably had "one thought too many." For some purposes, it may not be necessary to render familial love into propositional form, and there is significant evidence that a few basic emotions along these lines transfer across cultures (Ekman 1999). We might reasonably judge that some emotions can serve as valid bases for action just as emotions (i.e., independent of any propositional content).

*Role #6, Background:* We rely on various emotions to manage the background against which deliberation makes sense. Not all potentially controversial questions can be thematized simultaneously. We rely on the part of the life-world which has not been thematized in discourse as a set of implicit roles, expectations, and norms to provide the context against which meaningful deliberation can orient itself (Habermas 1987). Elements of the life-world are encoded and managed emotionally, for example, as habits that are regulated by the disposition system (Denzin 1985). 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. For example, we may be deliberating about some issue that does not overtly implicate gender. But in the course of discussion I may become anxious or indignant as a male member of the group repeatedly talks over the women in the group. Such feelings are a signal that the group needs to thematize heretofore backgrounded gender norms.

*Role #7, Enabling Conditions:* Reciprocity is at the core of most theories of deliberative democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 1998). Empathy and other emotions are thus enabling conditions for practical reason in that they are the basic means by which we can engage in reciprocal role-taking during deliberation (Morrell 2010). Rather than stripping ourselves of being situated and embodied subjects to reach a view from nowhere, deliberative 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 certain aspects of care ethics, and it is emotional engagement, rather than emotional detachment, that makes this possible (Slote 2007). Take, for example, King's (1963) *Letter from Birmingham Jail* where he writes, "Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race." In a stroke of rhetorical and psychological genius, King actually empathizes (if ruefully) with the white moderates, but in a way designed to shame them into precisely the kind of empathic reciprocity that they currently lack.

*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. Rehg (1994) felicitously describes this phenomenon in terms of emotions alerting us to "the limit of rational articulation," at least for the time being. We temporarily withhold consent even though we cannot as of yet explain why. 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. Most of us have had the experience of feeling bullied into a hasty conclusion by an interlocutor who is better informed on a topic than we are. Only later do we realize why it was that we were right to resist.

*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 accepting that norm. This role is the moral counterpart to "on-line" models of political cognition (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). People integrate information and reasoning into a summary judgment that gets stored as an affective valence. We can easily activate and remember the summary judgment, but we either forget or background the process that led to it. Put differently, emotional valences stand in for explicitly rehearsing the cognitions that led to some earlier judgment.

*Role #10, Application:* Emotions facilitate context-sensitive *application* of norms. Recall that emotions are, in part, *situational* evaluations. The idea here is that if we have a set of previously justified norms, when we are faced with real life problems, we must determine which norms apply. Doing so requires responsiveness to a rich social context much of which must be grasped through emotional sensitivity (Engster 2007). The problem is especially acute when norms appear to conflict. For example, an empathic jury might acquit a victim of domestic abuse of murder, even when the homicide itself is not in question (Russell and Melillo 2006).

*Role #11, Motivation to Act:* Emotions play an important motivational role to act on norms. Affective processes typically play a major role in motivating action (Scarantino 2017). This fact is represented in my definition of emotions as felt, situational evaluations that *motivate action*. But the point here is not merely stipulative. Brader (2005), for example, shows that emotionally laden political advertising significantly increases political participation.

*Role #12, Struggles for Recognition:* Finally, emotion has an important role to play when deliberation fails.<sup>5</sup> If deliberation is either openly exclusionary or subtly power laden people or groups so disadvantaged can engage in what Habermas calls "struggles for recognition." Within this general role, emotion can serve three subroles. First, it can serve as a signal to the excluded or oppressed groups that they have a claim (e.g., via feelings of indignation) rather than passively accepting some legitimating ideology (Iser 2009). For example, Jasper (2011) notes that "indignation at one's own government can be especially moving, as it involves a sense of betrayal . . . . Outrage over state repression, far from curtailing protest, can sometimes ignite it. One of the deepest satisfactions of collective action is a sense of confidence and agency, an end that in turn becomes a means to further action" (292). Second, emotionally charged protest can disrupt the status quo, grabbing people's attention and signaling that institutionalized processes might be missing something. As the AIDS epidemic in the United States accelerated in the 1980s, policy makers largely ignored the crisis, prompting AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and other groups to engage in direct action that forced attention on the issue. Finally, emotion can serve as the means by which the oppressor gains access to the need for recognizing the oppressed (which is related to roles #1 and #7). For example, during the civil rights movement, images of peaceful marchers being attacked with fire hoses and police dogs jarred many northern moderates out of complacency.

## CONCLUSION

Despite claims to the contrary, most deliberative democrats have never conceived of reason and emotion as incompatible. However, the theories of what roles emotion can and should play have been underdeveloped. I have identified and explicated 12 distinct roles that emotion plays in deliberation. Distinguishing these roles can help inform and expand the incipient empirical study of emotion in deliberation and serve as a reminder that it is not emotion but arbitrary power that opposes rationality in deliberative legitimacy.

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that struggles for recognition do not also occur *within* discourse. The civil rights movement, for example, included both direct action and ongoing attempts at persuasion. Here I want to emphasize the emotional functions distinct to direct action.

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