

Emotion Talk and Political Judgment

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Recent critics have argued that the concept of deliberation guiding much democratic theory is an overly rationalized one that undervalues the role of emotion in political communication. In this essay, I probe the puzzles of political judgment that come into view once we consider emotion a morally appropriate element of democratic communication. I argue that Aristotle's understanding of reason, emotion, and rhetoric directs our attention to "emotion talk" and offers resources for illuminating the worldly effects of beliefs about emotion in a context of inequality. Reflecting on the effects of how we listen to emotion talk can provoke consideration of the citizen ethos we desire.

Theories of deliberative democracy have garnered much critical attention recently. The promise of deliberation as a central democratic practice is that it provides a rationally and morally justifiable way of making political decisions. But recent critics have argued that the concept of deliberation guiding much theorizing is an overly rationalized one, relying on an ideal of dispassionate, reflective exchange that obscures or undervalues the role of emotion in political interaction and the mix of motives with which citizens legitimately approach such interaction. Although the deliberative ideal is "a procedure of free and reasoned deliberation among individuals considered as moral and political equals" (Benhabib 1996, 68), some theorists argue that this very conception works to perpetuate existing inequality. As Young (1996) contends, norms of "good" (i.e., rational) political communication are not neutral, but tend to reflect the communicative styles of already powerful social groups. Inegalitarian effects are inevitable unless we expand our understanding of political communication to include more affective elements; thus Young urges attention to such indispensable features of political communication as greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling (see also Young 2000, chap. 2). Sanders agrees that rationalized conceptions of deliberation ignore the way in which "status and hierarchy shape patterns of talking and listening"; she suggests "testimony" as a more egalitarian model of political communication (1997, 370–73). In Hall's perceptive essay (2007), she points

out that both Young and Sanders neglect to emphasize the way in which passion is already involved in deliberation. Passion is inextricably part of our judgments of value, and it is these judgments—judgments of "which goals and values to prioritize" (89)—with which deliberation is concerned.¹

A related criticism of deliberative theories is that participants are expected to be oriented toward "the common good" in an ideally rational deliberative context. Yet appeals to the "shared purposes" or "common interests" of a community are not neutral; they often serve to falsely universalize the perspectives of the powerful, while the concerns of those not part of the dominant culture are marked out as particular and selfish. The language of commonality itself can perpetuate inequality, particularly when invoked by those who command political, communicative, or economic resources (Fraser 1997; Young 1990). Further, an ideal of disinterested commitment to "the force of the better argument" (i.e., the renunciation of any purpose but reason) is, as Dietz has shown, ill-suited to "the fugitive quality of politics, where the elements of the communicative and the strategic are intricately entangled and intertwined" (2002, 154).

The sum of these criticisms is that contemporary theories of deliberation fail to take the full measure of the conflictual, impassioned, and power-laden character of politics. (This may reflect the fact that much deliberative theory is informed by the work of John Rawls and/or Jürgen Habermas, whose insights derive

¹Hall is using the term "passion" specifically to mean "enthusiastic care and devotion." But she argues that passion in this sense is fundamental to all powerful emotion. Even "the passion of hate implies a passion for something; specifically, something that one values and believes is threatened by the object of hatred" (2007, 87). I will continue to use "passion" and "emotion" interchangeably.

from the use of a certain kind of abstraction—the ideal speech situation, the original position). I am largely in agreement with these criticisms, whose point is that we need to think differently about what democratic political communication in a conflictual and inegalitarian context might require. But legitimating the emotional and partisan aspects of political thinking does not get rid of problems of inequality and difference in political communication and judgment. My purpose in this essay, then, is to move from the criticism of overly rationalized conceptions of deliberation to the framing and consideration of problems that come into view once we consider emotion and partisan thinking as morally appropriate elements of democratic communication.

To think about emotion in political communication, I turn not to Rawls or Habermas but to Aristotle, for whom political communication was inevitably conflictual and strategic. I aim to show that there are three features of Aristotle's account that are particularly illuminating: his view that emotion is cognitive in important ways and partially constitutive of judgments of value; that it is habituated; and that emotion-beliefs play a central role in political communication. In particular, I argue that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* directs our attention not only to some inner seat of the emotions, but also outward, to "emotion talk." By "emotion talk," I mean to indicate the way we talk about emotions, which is often intertwined with or prompted by talk that is emotionally expressive or that uses emotional appeals.² My argument is that an Aristotle-inspired account can illuminate the worldly effects of social beliefs about emotion in a context of inequality. I call this account "Aristotle inspired" because it draws concepts and categories from Aristotle while also moving beyond him in two ways: by focusing on dynamics of inequality and difference and by focusing explicitly on talk *about* emotion as part of the practice of persuasion. In constructing and employing this Aristotelian lens, I don't claim to *solve* problems of emotion talk, but rather to disclose and describe them, and to probe the puzzles of political judgment that they raise. One central puzzle is that because we are habituated in a context of difference, conflict, and inequality, it is

²Imagine a school board meeting on a controversial redistricting proposal, where angry comments (emotionally expressive talk) prompt a call for calm: "let's settle down, anger won't get us anywhere" (emotion talk, asserting that anger is unproductive). In turn, an upset parent might respond—angrily—"of course I'm angry, we're talking about my kid!" Or "This board never listens until we get angry!" This response is emotionally expressive and also makes a claim about emotion, in this case about the normative appropriateness or political effectiveness of anger.

particularly difficult to distinguish which emotions and what kind of emotion talk we should listen to. I end by suggesting some questions we might ask as we make these judgments, questions which turn our attention to our own *ethos* as listeners and as citizens.

Aristotle: Emotion, Reason, and Rhetoric

The western tradition of political thought engages in "a continuous redrawing of the boundaries of the rational" (Jaggar 1989, 166), of what reason looks like, what it does, and who has it. To engage in this redrawing of reason's boundaries has also been to describe and delimit the domain of emotions. And the western tradition of discourse about emotion is, as Lutz (1988, 67) has noted, both ambivalent and multivalent. The most familiar story stresses the antagonism between reason and emotion and regards emotion as the dark chaotic force that the fully rational self triumphs over, separates from, or governs. (This ideology of emotion interacts with and fortifies ideologies of race and gender, about who counts as the mature self and who is weak, dangerous, and in need of being governed; Lloyd 1984; Lutz 1988, esp. 74; Young 1990, chap. 4–5). A concurrent tradition values emotion more positively. On this view, emotion is opposed not to reason but to alienation, estrangement, and disengagement. Emotion signifies a fully alive and committed way of being in the world, and emotional experience is the fundamental element of genuine human selfhood.³

So emotion is regarded either as misleading rational perception or as the privileged mode of perception, as disruptive of or central to the meaningful activity of the self. Dissatisfaction with these opposing alternatives has led many thinkers to turn to Aristotle's account (e.g., Allen 2004; Nussbaum 1994; Sherman 1997). For Aristotle, emotions are indeed central to the kinds of creatures humans are, but what is crucial to moral and political perception is the *interaction* of emotion and reason. In Salkever's translation, "Prohairesis [decision] is either understanding combined with desire or desire combined with thought, and what originates [movement] in

³We can recognize these alternate ideologies in a variety of cultural forms: Enlightenment reason, modern science, and bureaucratic thinking on one hand, and Romanticism, existentialism, and some radical feminism on the other. (Cocks 1984 describes and critically assesses early radical feminists' valorization of feeling against reason.)

this way is a human being” (2000, 5).⁴ We feel emotions for particular reasons; for example, I am angry at you because you did not act as promised. This involves a particular set of judgments or beliefs: that you made a commitment, that your actions did not count as fulfilling it, and that this nonperformance is legitimate grounds for anger. (Or see Aristotle’s example of fear (*NE* 1115a-b), which involves an understanding about what is bad, the belief that the bad is approaching, and so on.) As Nussbaum puts it, emotions “are not mindless surges of affect, but discerning ways of viewing objects; and beliefs of various types are their necessary conditions” (1994, 88; see also Allen 2004, 150). Emotions also help indicate relevant features of situations that we need to attend to in figuring out what to do (Sherman 1997). Although this cognitive evaluation can be related to emotion in a sequential way (I believe X, and this produces anger or I am angry, and this leads me to see X), there is a more integrated sense in which emotion and belief work together. In this sense emotion is partially but importantly constitutive of the perception; full perception requires the evaluative response of emotion. As Nussbaum puts it, emotional responses “are part of what knowing, that is, truly recognizing or acknowledging, *consists in*” (1990, 79). In ordinary language, we might say, “Well, I knew it, but I didn’t really *know* it”; this “really knowing” involves the emotional appreciation or comprehension of what is at hand.

Thus, on the Aristotelian account, judging well would not mean the triumph of reason over emotion or vice versa, but rather something like having the right feelings for the right reasons. But reason and emotion do not automatically or naturally perceive harmoniously. My emotion may lead me to mischaracterize a situation, perhaps to overemphasize certain particulars; in this case, how we feel seduces us into misperceiving, and “this misperception in its turn affects judgment” (Leighton 1996, 212). For example, because I am furious at you, I feel, believe, and decide things (“you don’t care about me” or “I can never agree to this”) that in most other emotional states I do not in fact mean or maintain.⁵ As Sherman

(1997, 50) sums, emotion’s perception can be partial, unreliable, capricious, excessive, involuntary or otherwise out of our control.

So emotion and reason do not automatically intertwine, but neither are they inevitably antagonistic; as Aristotle points out, sometimes emotion can be seen “countering and opposing” reason, while at other times emotion seems “to share in” reason. Aristotle doesn’t say that emotion is *rational*, but rather that it is *reasonable*, by which he means that it is capable of listening to good advice. “The nonrational part ... is persuaded in some way by reason, as is shown by correction, and by every sort of reproof and exhortation” (*NE* 1102b–1103a).⁶ Thus persuasion (whether in the form of admonishment or advice, reproof or exhortation) is a critical force in the cultivation of excellent practical insight, in the bringing together of reason and emotion.

For Aristotle, then, excellence is not simply a matter of acting well or thinking correctly but also of feeling rightly, of feeling the proper responses “at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner” (*NE* 1106b). And this requires cultivation, because such excellence of character—feeling rightly—cannot be straightforwardly taught but must rather be developed through habitual activity (*NE* 1103a–b).⁷ Interpreting this in terms of ordinary notions of “habit” can mislead; crucially, Aristotle’s is not a mechanical model of unthinking or automatic behavior. Consider his own example of learning to play the harp (*NE* 1098a, 1103b) or some other musical instrument. The would-be musician does not simply repeat identical actions over and over, but rather recognizes how to judge and thus develop her own practice, by her own or a teacher’s familiarity with what the instrument or piece played well sounds like. Perhaps she needs to focus on more accurate fingering, or work on better breath control, or figure out what volume where conveys the mood she is after. This practice is habitual in that it becomes part of her character (in this case, her character as a musician).

⁴Emotion is only one category of desire for Aristotle (the larger category also includes physiological appetites). See Irwin (1999, 323); Nussbaum (1994, 81–84).

⁵I say “in most other emotional states” to underscore that the difference between perceiving and misperceiving is not a matter of whether emotion is present or not. What distinguishes the two situations, if it is not a difference in the “amount” of reason or emotion present, remains to be worked out—and this is part of the difficulty about “judging our judgments” discussed below.

⁶Although Aristotle here places reason in the role of advisor, other aspects of the text suggest that emotion can also play the guiding role. For example, in *NE* book 6, chap. 13, Aristotle articulates the various ways in which prudence (*phronesis*) and virtue of character require each other, concluding that “we cannot be fully good without prudence, or prudent without virtue of character” (*NE* 1144b30). The first clause pictures practical reason advising emotion, while the second indicates rightly trained emotion guiding practical reason.

⁷See Sherman’s (1997, 83–93) discussion of various modes of cultivating emotion, including viewing tragic theater; also Koziak (2000, chap. 5–6).

In the same way, developing a character in which feeling rightly and acting rightly coincide requires a society whose laws, customs, and political and educational practices engage people to practice a certain habit of thoughtfulness about emotion and action.⁸

In many ways this conception of practical reason—of the appropriate role of feeling in reasoned moral perception about what to do—is an attractive way of thinking about what goes on when a complexly souled being makes judgments.⁹ But thus far it seems to assume a clearer (or at least more consensual) standard of “feeling rightly” than most contemporary societies have. There is probably a wider consensus on what counts as playing the harp well than there is on what the right emotion-beliefs would be in a particular situation. The difficulty here is that we have no neat standard that would enable us to distinguish when emotion is discerning and when misleading.¹⁰ How do we know what advice is good advice to listen to?

This is a problem not only in terms of our internal deliberations, but in collective deliberation as well. “We enlist partners in deliberation on large issues when we distrust our own ability to discern [the right answer]” (*NE* 1112b). To speak of collective perception and persuasion is to expand the discussion from individual deliberation to public communication, and it is in the *Rhetoric* that Aristotle offers further insight about the role of emotion in public discourse. Here again, emotion is tightly linked to reason, particularly in the familiar declaration that persuasion involves three interrelated “proofs”: “some

are in the character of the speaker [*ethos*], and some in disposing the listener in some way [*pathos*], and some in the argument itself, by showing or seeming to show something [*logos*]” (1.2.3).¹¹ To focus on “disposing the listener in some way” is to acknowledge that “emotions are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments” (*Rhet* 2.1.8). This is not to imply a sort of thoughtless malleability. As Abizadeh has shown, Aristotle regards all three forms of proof as happening through *logos*, not in the narrow sense of a logical demonstration (this is the third form), but rather in the broader sense of “practical *logos* or discursive rationality” (2002, 272–73).¹² The emotional state itself is intertwined with belief that a particular state of affairs obtain, and being persuaded by the speaker is bound up with feeling and thinking about who the speaker is and what argument he or she articulates.

Knowing about people’s emotions—how they might be “disposed” and for what better and worse reasons—is knowing something about how to communicate to them. For Aristotle, this knowing consists partly of a general understanding of the reasons why people do what they do (*Rhet* 1.10.8), and it further requires attention to relatively fixed characteristics that might be clues to emotional dispositions: the constitution under which one speaks, the stage of life or social condition of one’s audience (*Rhet* 1.8, 2.12–17). But it is equally critical to know something about what state of mind an emotion involves, against whom it is usually felt, and for what specific kinds of reasons (*Rhet* 2.1.9). I say “know something about” these items deliberately, because Aristotle makes clear that rhetoric does not offer scientific knowledge [*episteme*] of “certain underlying facts” (*Rhet* 1.4.6). Rhetoric is rather a specific faculty, an ability “to see the available means of persuasion” in a given case (*Rhet* 1.2.1). Aristotle’s discussion of emotions in *Rhetoric* 2 helps us realize that this ability includes knowing what people believe about emotions. For example, Aristotle notes that people become angry at friends more than not-friends, “for they think it is more appropriate for them to be well treated by them [friends] than not”

⁸This claim that the habitual activity at hand is a practice of thoughtfulness rests on Aristotle’s discussion in *NE* Books 2 and 3, where he argues that moral excellence is excellence in emotion and action, and both are subjects of deliberation and decision. Frank’s (2005, chap. 1) account captures beautifully the way in which, for Aristotle, character or identity is a result of the interaction between ongoing activity and institutional context.

⁹Despite its contemporary religious and immaterial connotations, for the Greeks, soul (*psuche*) meant something more like the animating force that makes us the particular kind of living being we are. “To speak of soul, for Aristotle, is to consider the manner in which living organisms are self-moving, and thus distinct from nonliving things . . . this conception of the soul as the definitive activity of an organism is nicely captured in Aristotle’s analogical metaphor ‘If the eye were an animal, sight would be its soul’ (*De Anima*2, 412b18–19)” (Salkever 1990, 66). Thus (though not only humans have souls), the human “soul” is the set of animating forces that constitutes humanness.

¹⁰I acknowledge that to talk in terms of emotional perception and misperception is too simple. There are multiple ways of missing something about a situation, of going wrong, as well as multiple discerning perspectives. For the sake of clarity, I will continue to talk in terms of emotion being discerning or misleading, but this more complex context should be kept in mind.

¹¹For Aristotle, rhetoric is not a matter of manipulating emotion, but rather drawing on and harmonizing these multiple modes of perception and clues to judgment. (A speaker could behave differently, of course, but that would be more like sophistry than rhetoric.) By going on with the *Rhetoric* in this way, I am leaving aside questions about the compatibility of Aristotle’s views on ethics and deliberation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with those in the *Rhetoric*. For more discussion, see the essays by Halliwell and Irwin in Rorty (1996).

¹²See also the thoughtful discussion in Allen (2004, 143–46).

(*Rhet* 2.2.15). We can read this not only as a claim about what angers people, but also as an indication of the behaviors that people believe justify anger.

The intimation here is that the ways that people think about emotion can be a source of insight into the available means of persuasion (even if this rhetorical insight doesn't automatically produce persuasion or guarantee agreement [*Rhet* 1.1.14]). I would add further that to know what people commonly believe about emotions is also to know what ways of talking about them are common and commonly accepted. Thus the ways people think *and talk* about emotion are part of communicative struggle over meaning and political conflict over public decisions. Following these implications of Aristotle's analysis, then, focuses our attention on what we might call "emotion talk."¹³

By "emotion talk," again, I mean both the way we talk about emotions, as well as talk that is emotionally expressive or that uses emotional appeals. Although often talk about emotion may be intentionally dispassionate (as in the policymaking example in the following section), it is often the case that talk about emotion is itself emotionally expressive. To think in terms of "emotion talk" enables us to think about the role of emotion in public deliberation in a way that does not regard emotion as an essentially natural and private reaction, nor as primarily physiological or neurochemical, nor as reducible to universal psychic drives.¹⁴ Rather, emotion is at once personal experience and deeply social practice; emotional phenomena are "a way of talking about the intensely meaningful as that is culturally defined, socially enacted, and personally articulated" (Lutz 1988, chap. 1, esp. 4–5). Common beliefs about emotions are not wholly separate from subjective experiences of emotion, of course; often such beliefs reflect one's subjective experience, and this is why they have persuasive power. But emotion talk is not simply reflective of such experience, for it also shapes experience. To speak it is "to attempt to characterize and to move events, not merely or even mainly to map them":

Emotion words may be used to theorize about events, to moralize about or to judge them, and to advance one's interests by defining the situation in a particular way. (Lutz 1988, 10–11)

Understood in this way, emotion talk is one of the central ways in which people negotiate and dispute

¹³The term "emotion talk" is drawn from Lutz (1988).

¹⁴For work informed by neuroscientific accounts of emotion, see Marcus (2002) and McDermott (2004). Gunnell (2007) offers criticism of this approach.

meaning and value in political communication. It is a means of challenging and of reinforcing power, and it can be used to expand or constrict relations between citizens, groups of citizens, and publics. Emotion talk, as a way in which moral and political judgments are expressed and contested, is neither illegitimate nor innocent. Its moral and power-laden character—power in both the structural and the strategic sense—is what we need to understand as we continue to think through a communicative democratic politics. The examples I examine in the next two sections suggest that the work of emotion talk around issues that involve structural inequality is particularly salient for democrats.

Emotion Talk I: Reason, Emotion, and Policymaking

It is tempting to make the general claim that in our society, good political decision making is not supposed to be based on emotion. Such a claim must be qualified, however. For we certainly seem to expect candidates for political office to "feel rightly"—to convey outrage or concern appropriately or risk being seen as somehow less trustworthy. In the realm of policymaking, however, a purified notion of reason does often seem to hold sway. Consider the example of the "toxics movement" (Szasz 1994), the widespread activism of grassroots citizen groups against hazardous industrial waste and other health and environmental threats. This activism is often identified as an outbreak of "the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome." The use and misuse of the NIMBY concept provides a concrete example of the significance of emotion talk in the exercise of power. For example, policymakers describe citizen resistance to proposed disposal facilities for hazardous waste, or citizens' insistence on toxic cleanup, as driven by emotion and thus a hindrance to good policymaking (see the discussion in McAvoy 1999). Emotion is used here to characterize both motivation and perception. According to diagnosticians of the NIMBY syndrome, this activism is emotionally motivated by selfishness; citizens are putting their narrow personal interests ahead of the greater good of the larger community (whether understood as the state, the region, or the nation). Fear is also at work and causes citizens to perceive irrationally, in the sense of being ignorant of or disregarding the sound reasons why there is nothing to fear.

So the NIMBY syndrome as a complex emotion concept works to explain—and denigrate or dismiss—motivations for action. It also works to designate

citizen activists as unreliable, systematically misguided perceivers. Their emotions keep them from being able to hear and understand the rational justifications for policies, despite policy makers' extensive information campaigns. The assumption is that if citizens would put aside emotion and let their reason prevail, they would agree that the policy makers' proposals are sound—that they make sense and are fair. But citizen emotion prevents this reasoned moral perception.¹⁵

Citizen activists recognize this emotion talk as an exercise of power and offer an alternative account of emotion and perception. As activist Lois Gibbs explains:

Generally, people at first have a blind faith in government. So when they go to EPA or the state agency and show them there is a problem, they think the government will side with them. It takes them about a year before they realize the government is not going to help them. They see the agencies studying them to death. That's when they become really angry—radicalized. (quoted in Greider 1992, 167)

The original faith perception, cultivated by various kinds of civics lessons, is not unreasoned or non-cognitive; it consists of a set of beliefs about citizenship, government aid, and fairness. These beliefs may have significant emotional components, like pride in one's country as a democratic system, an appreciative and deeply felt sense of the justice of that system, or confidence and trust in particular political figures.¹⁶ Although not thoughtless or arbitrary, this perception is limited or misleading—"blind," in Gibbs' term. Further experiences develop changes in belief bound up with changes in emotion. (By "bound up with," I mean that emotion—anger, in this case—is a constituent of the change in perception of the state of affairs, not simply a result or a cause.) This change in perception can happen with respect to a particular judgment or can become part of one's character, as these experiences "radicalize" one's characteristic mode of perception.

This counterdiscourse uses emotion talk to justify citizen perception, by contending that anger works as

part of accurate moral and political judgment.¹⁷ In other words, as Gibbs and others suggest, anger is a constituent of discerning judgments about environmental harm and political culpability. But this counterclaim about legitimate forms of political judgment takes place in a context of unequal institutional power. Thus the retelling of the emotion story by activists can have limited impact in terms of communicative interaction between these adversaries. The understandings that shape policy strategies are formed in discussions where "the admission ticket to debate is: 'you have to sound reasonable'" (Greider 1992, 216). As Lois Gibbs notes in reference to a series of conferences bringing together environmental and business interests, to which community activists were not invited: "we were told that grassroots people are too ignorant or too hysterical to be able to participate meaningfully" (Greider 1992, 216). Citizens are thus limited to guerilla tactics and blocking actions rather than forging an ongoing involvement in structures of decision-making power (Greider 1992; McAvoy 1999).

As we consider this example of emotion talk in political communication, it might appear that activists would benefit by distinguishing between emotional perception and emotional expression. Why not take the insights that arise from emotional understanding and figure out how to convey them in a way that "sounds reasonable"? In myriad ways, people do make this conscious effort all the time; speaking is rarely just the blurting out of unfiltered perceptions. So of course part of communicating involves thinking about who one's audience is and how they will react. But there are limits to how much particular points can be separated from modes of discerning and communicating them. Some points can only be meaningfully made—can only have their full content manifested—in particular modes. Suppose I say calmly, "six of my neighbors have developed brain tumors, including my brother." Suppose I say this exactly as though I were saying that "10 parts per billion is safe" or "the probability of an accident is statistically insignificant."¹⁸ To speak my point with an utter lack of

¹⁵McAvoy (1999) shows that hazardous waste policymakers often see a moral imperative in their own work and thus are not just being disingenuous in claiming the moral high ground.

¹⁶This may seem like an unlikely set of beliefs given recurrent disillusionment with politics. But such disillusionment often coexists with a general patriotism and a relatively positive evaluation of one's own representative. (Gallup polls consistently show voters rating their own representative more highly than they rate Congress as a whole; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/139409/Voters-Favor-Congressional-Newcomers-Incumbents.aspx>. Accessed 10/2/2010.)

¹⁷Similarly, a citizen activist in rural Minnesota counters the assignation of selfishness by characterizing self-concern as necessary to perceive the entirety of a situation, and as a responsibility of citizenship: "I think of it as concentric circles. First, I look out there to my backyard, then to the county, and then to the state. But someone has to look out for my backyard. The people in [urban areas] aren't going to" (McAvoy 1999, 134).

¹⁸The first two statements are adapted from the *New York Times*' "Toxic Waters" series. See especially "Clean Water Laws Are Neglected, at a Cost in Suffering" and the attached video "Coal in the Water," 9/12/2009. www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/us/13water.html (accessed 5/13/2010).

affect, or with only a kind of mild conversational affect, is to drain it of meaning. Or, at the very least, it makes it extraordinarily confusing—the cues from my emotional expression fit so uneasily with the substance of the sentence that a listener can only think they have misheard or misunderstood or that I am some kind of psychopath. The result is the same: the actual point I want to make, in all its meaning, isn't heard.

Further, the community activists discussed above are not simply trying to get a specific point heard; they are defending, or trying to legitimate, a mode of expressing and perceiving value. They recognize that it is the exclusion of this mode (and not just of a particular point) that maintains current patterns of decision making, in which what citizens value can be dismissed in favor of cost-benefit analyses or state actors' decisions about what should be done. Adapting to a particular ideology of emotion talk not only places an extraordinary burden of translation and performance on grassroots activists, but leaves unchallenged the structural conditions that insist on this translation.

When reasons are dismissed to the extent that they can be attributed to emotion, not all reasons are considered equally. With respect to this example, we might be tempted to say that a more Aristotelian understanding of the way in which emotions can be guides to discerning judgment would shape public policy discourse in more inclusive—i.e., more democratic—ways. But as I have noted, it is equally Aristotelian to recognize that emotion can misguide judgment. For Aristotle, this would be a matter of not being habituated rightly; but what about when we don't really have that sort of standard? How do we know when to let which emotions guide us and what kind of emotion talk to be persuaded by? The saliency and difficulty of this question is sharpened by returning to Aristotle's conception of habituation. We can use Aristotle's understanding of habituation and its effects in a critical sense, as a reverse analytic lens that encourages us to recognize the impact of habituation on democratic public life.

Emotion Talk II: Emotion Through the Prism of Difference¹⁹

Our emotional dispositions, including our expectations and interpretations of others, have been formed

¹⁹I draw the concept of thinking “through the prism of difference” from Baca Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Messner (2011).

in a context of racism, sexism, class inequality, and diverse social prejudices. We are habituated to value certain kinds of emotions expressed in certain ways by certain kinds of people, and to denigrate, suspect, or avoid expressions that don't fit those parameters. (Which expressions are suspect in this way often varies by familial or communal subcultures.) A standard example is the phenomenon of angry women often being regarded as hysterical, upset, overreacting. As stale as this example may be, any woman given to articulating anger can tell you that these reactions still occur quite frequently.²⁰ Anger is still so uncomfortable a fit with norms of femininity—particularly of white femininity—that what otherwise might be seen as anger has to be reinterpreted or filtered through emotional categories that are less at odds with these gender assumptions. When this cannot be accomplished, womanliness rather than anger can be questioned, as in those inevitably hairy-legged feminists who are angry all the time. (And who thereby forfeit their status as interlocutors, since they obviously cannot be communicated with reasonably.) Although both white women and women of color are subject to having their anger dismissed in this way (Lorde 1984), the expression of anger by African American women and men is often regarded by whites as especially threatening, or prone to issue in violence. However, rather than violating norms, “angry blacks” are a stereotype that supports a racial order that implicitly treats blacks as dangerous and less moral/reasonable selves. Thus a multitude of forceful emotional expressions are too easily viewed as “anger.”²¹

I am implying that these are “misinterpretations” of emotional expression. This does not rest on a claim that there is an emotional truth underlying the expression (with the subject's understanding providing privileged access to that truth), for my emotional states are not always transparent to me even upon reflection. And it is surely untenable to claim that I am being treated unfairly unless you understand me exactly as I want you to. What one can argue, however, is that the systematic attribution or denial of particular emotions to others (particularly on the basis of group identity) prevents certain

²⁰But see Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) for scholarly confirmation.

²¹Recall the media discussion during the last presidential campaign about whether Michelle Obama was an “angry Black woman” (for reminders, see Waldman 2008; <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/6/17/35717/6541>, accessed 10/3/2010.) In 2010, CNN published a controversial opinion piece on “Why Obama doesn't dare become the ‘angry black man’” with respect to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (http://articles.cnn.com/2010-06-08/politics/rage.obama_1_president-obama-barack-obama-race-relations). (Accessed 10/1/2010).

emotion-beliefs (and those who hold them) from playing a role in joint communication over what matters and what makes sense.

Habituation to a context of inequality thus can affect our interpretation of others' emotion talk. Awareness of this possibility might lead us to suggest that the emotional disposition best suited to democratic communication is one of openness and generosity in interpreting others' performances. But some feminist theorists have made an important case for the opposite point. Meyers notes that some philosophers (like Nussbaum) do indeed suggest that the way to overcome the distortions of prejudicial "conventions of interpretation" is to cultivate a supple receptive emotional attitude—a "generosity of spirit" predisposed to trust and sensitivity. But this "niceness" can make people less likely to perceive actual injustice and oppression (1997, 199–203).²² Meyers constructs a persuasive argument that "rancorous emotional attitudes and outlaw emotions" enable "heterodox moral perception" (204–208):

My conjecture is that, when people have become hypersensitive, paranoid, angry, or bitter as a result of being subjected to a devastating injustice (or series of injustices) or to disabling systemic oppression, they become preternaturally sensitive to unjust practices and oppressive conditions. . . . [which] increases the likelihood that such individuals will discern patterns of harm where nicer, milder types see only disconnected incidents or notice nothing the least untoward." (1997, 209)

Similarly, McFall (1991) has argued that bitterness is sometimes an accomplishment of moral perception. Neither theorist recommends this emotional attitude nor regards it as particularly pleasant to experience. But they make an important contribution by presenting an epistemological challenge to the practice of dismissing "outlaw emotions" or underestimating their role in moral perception and political judgment. This line of thinking underscores the difficulty of privileging a particular emotional orientation in principle.²³

Habituation to a specific social context also presents certain challenges in terms of judging our own emotional evaluations. We may be trying to live up to certain self-understandings that conflict with particular emotion-beliefs, but are intimately related

to what we value—being a good neighbor or a loyal friend, someone who "stands up for their rights," "cares about other people," "pulls their own weight." However, these identity commitments may not be the ones we were habituated to, that are deeply ingrained in us as a result of prolonged character training. In fact, they may be opposed to that "education." Consider a woman who was subtly taught to always put care for others first who now works to articulate her own interests and needs, or a white person who for much of their life was unaware of white privilege and is now committed to active antiracist work. These people are likely to find themselves in situations where their habituated emotional evaluations are not consistent with their moral/political judgment. The problem I am suggesting this raises for the would-be thoughtful agent is when to understand one's emotions as a clue to insightful perception and action, and when to act in spite of one's emotions—to act in the face of fear, to listen when we don't want to.

Emotion Talk and Political Judgment

My point here is that emotional expressions are interpreted, reacted to, given meaning by ourselves and by others in a context of difference, conflict, and inequality. This context also supplies multiple interpretive frames—ways of talking—about emotion. To say that emotion is misleading or discerning does not just indicate different experiential possibilities, but also multiple ways of talking about emotion, coexisting cultural beliefs about emotion. These cultural beliefs include general claims about emotion working with or against reason, as well as evaluations of particular emotions as valuable and appropriate (or not). These multiple frames lead us to read emotion one way or another, and those readings have particular worldly effects on our ability to communicate democratically.

For example, it makes a difference how we *hear* the claims of what Fraser (1997) calls "subaltern counterpublics" struggling for civil rights or political recognition. It makes a difference whether these claims are interpreted as the resentment of those who see themselves primarily as perpetually injured victims (Brown 1995), or as the anger and indignation of citizens who are being prevented from full cultural and political membership. A claim of victimhood is not automatically or solely an assertion of powerlessness and suffering; it can also be heard as an

²²Relatedly, Burack (1994) argues that feminist theories have neglected to incorporate the "ugly" emotions (hate, anger, envy) as aspects of the relational self; Lorde (1984) argues for the appropriateness of anger in responding to injustice.

²³In fact, the implication is that a plurality of emotional orientations—and communication between them—may be what enhances moral and political perception (Meyers 1997, 211–14).

assertion about the exercise of unjust power. One potential effect of the latter interpretation is that it enables us to reconceptualize citizenship so that vulnerability and suffering does not undermine our conceptual standing as equal participants (Bickford 1997).

Rather than further scrutinizing the psychology of those who make the claims, then, we might turn outward, to imagine the *effects* of particular interpretations. To suggest the importance of this “outward” turn, to thinking about potential effects of particular judgments, is not to deny the importance of the more “inward” work of self-reflection about our emotion-beliefs. Hall is persuasive about the value of this kind of “working with one’s passions”:

The point, to begin with, is to increase self-awareness of one’s various reason-passions...to become more conscious of their existence, to clarify their true objects, to understand better the goods they envision, and to become more cognizant of the beliefs and judgments entailed in those visions. (2005, 128)

But because there can be no final perfect clarity here (as Hall acknowledges), and because our habituated emotions may continue to sit uneasily with our moral and political values, we may need to turn to a variety of other reflective resources for judgment. One of these resources, I suggest, is to imagine a plurality of interpretive possibilities as we listen to the emotion talk of others, and to consider their possible political effects.²⁴

This suggestion emphasizes the political import of how we listen. I also want to offer another way in which reflecting on ourselves as listeners might provide additional resources for judgment. Note that in political communication, there may be multiple layers or strains of judgment going on. The obvious judgment at hand is deciding what action to take or what opinion to adhere to. As part of this judgment (particularly in difficult or uncertain cases) one may also engage in evaluating the elements of one’s decision-making process—judging one’s conflicting emotion beliefs and reasons as sufficient, good,

²⁴To think in terms of “imagining plurality” evokes Hannah Arendt’s conception of representative thinking—thinking from the standpoint of others or “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (1968, 241). Arendt’s conception has been influential; see for example Disch (1994), Bickford (1996), Zerilli (2005). But see also Sharon Krause’s Hume-inspired argument for judging from a “generalized perspective.” My stress on habituation chimes with Krause’s insight that our experiences can limit our imagination, and thus I agree with her argument that democratic judgment also requires institutional guarantees of inclusion: “we can imagine the sentiments of others much better if they are able to tell us about them, after all” (2008, 113).

reasonable, right. And that judgment may in turn be informed by judgments about the speech of others. This aspect turns around Aristotle’s question of “how to persuade”; the question becomes how to know whether to *be* persuaded—how to judge various speakers’ attempts to influence our judgments.

We might be rightly leery of a speaker who attempts to persuade by inflaming the passions and prejudices of an audience. But our question reappears: if emotions can be part of discerning perception, what counts as their illicit inflammation? Following Aristotle, we might look at the other “means of persuasion,” *logos* and *ethos*. Although the quality of the reasoning matters, of course, public decisions are rarely simple enough that there is one logically right decision, with all others clearly identifiable as foolish, unreasonable, or nonsensical. Thus as listeners we often turn to *ethos*: the character of the speaker, as exhibited in speech, and not necessarily “from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person” (*Rhet* 1.2.4).²⁵ As Bernard Yack points out, the character of the speaker “plays an especially weighty role in helping people decide when they are uncertain about which of a number of options to favor” (2006, 430).²⁶ The specific qualities of character that Aristotle believes are persuasive when demonstrated in speech are practical reason, virtue, and good will (*Rhet* 2.1.5). The demonstration of these three qualities gives the audience reason to believe that the speaker has discerned rightly, and will give what they perceive to be the best advice because they want good things for us (*Rhet* 2.1.5–7, also 2.4.1–3). This seems a bit circular, though, if it is from the speech itself that we are supposed to draw our evaluations of character;

²⁵In his commentary on the *Rhetoric*, Kennedy points out that restricting our judgment to character as revealed in the speech itself excludes “the authority that a speaker may possess due to his position in government or society, previous actions, [or] reputation for wisdom.” Why Aristotle excludes these persuasive elements isn’t made explicit; Kennedy speculates it may be because they are “nonartistic” elements of persuasion (1991, 38n). But Markovits gives us more substantive reasons to focus our judgment the current speech and not on “previous opinion”: “while one may establish a reputation as a person who is worthy of trust ... reputation is not a sufficient substitute for the relentless questioning and answering required of democratic accountability” (2008, 211).

²⁶John O’Neill argues further that the *ethos* of the speaker is particularly important in situations where making a judgment involves scientific or technical expertise that most of us simply don’t possess. What we have to rely on then is “judgments about the credibility and reliability of sources,” judgments about when trust is appropriate and when skepticism (O’Neill 2002, esp. 257–61). See also Markovits’ thoughtful elaboration of how, in a mass-mediated democracy, we might judge the trustworthiness of speakers (2008, 207–16).

if we already knew what practical reason sounded like in this case, or what course of action was good for us, we wouldn't be so uncertain about how to judge.²⁷

To illustrate the difficulty for listeners of judging these elements, let's turn back to an ancient Greek example: Cleon and Diodotus' debate over Mytilene in *The Peloponnesian War*. The characters of these speakers could not be more different, if we rely on what Thucydides tells us about Cleon (he is introduced to us as "the most violent man at Athens" [3.37]). But distinguishing their character through their *speeches* turns out to be a more complicated task.

Recall the context: Mitylene was an ally of Athens, one of the few permitted to contribute ships (rather than simply pay tribute) and thus to maintain some independence from Athens. Growing increasingly distrustful of Athens' imperial ambitions, in the fourth year of the war Mitylene revolted, but—due to the dawdling of the Peloponnesian fleet supposed to come to her aid—was eventually compelled to surrender to the Athenian forces. The assembly back at Athens, "in the fury of the moment," decided to put to death the entire adult male population of the city (i.e., not just those responsible for the revolt). However, as Thucydides tells us, "the morrow brought repentance with it and reflection on the horrid cruelty of a decree which condemned a whole city to the fate merited only by the guilty," and an assembly was called to reconsider the verdict (3.27–36).

Cleon begins what we know as the Mitylene Debate by chiding the assembly for even being willing to reconsider their previous decision to put the Mitylenians to death. He is no panderer; he criticizes the many to their face, blaming their dangerous changeability on their love of splashy rhetorical contest, their addiction to "the pleasure of the ear" (3.38). Furthermore, he gives reasons for why their original decision is justified, making clear what he thinks is the central concern at hand and explaining what he thinks will happen if they change their mind. And Cleon also engages in certain forms of emotion talk. He appeals to the *demos* to summon up the original anger that led them to their original decision: "do not be traitors to yourselves, but recall as nearly as possible the moment of suffering and the supreme importance which you then attached to their reduction; and now pay them back in their turn" (3.40).

²⁷Danielle Allen addresses this problem by suggesting that speakers make a point of showing that they have "habitual competence" at practical decision making; "the point is to display to an audience that one's habitual thought processes lead to pragmatically successful endeavors" (2004, 145–46).

This payback is a matter of justice for Cleon, of giving like for like.

Diodotus famously cedes the language of justice to Cleon, and engages in his own form of emotion talk.²⁸ He attempts to rhetorically expunge emotion from the decision, as he urges the Athenians to put aside both anger and pity, and consider only their long-term interest. His calm rationality may make him seem more trustworthy, especially since he is proposing what in the end is a more merciful course of action (although he will not characterize it that way). Yet perhaps this is misleading, and this is instead an occasion where anger enables us to discern rightly. To consider each speech as a reaction to the specific context, let me imagine myself an Athenian male of the time—someone involved in decision making about Mitylene—uncertain about what judgment to make, that is to say, who or what to be persuaded by. (The text gives us reason to believe that many Athenians were in this state; the fact of reconsideration itself, the very close final vote.)

Both Diodotus and Cleon speak in terms of interest. Cleon argues that Athens' interest requires us to proceed with the death decree; to spare the Mitylenians will simply encourage other cities to revolt, and Athens will have to devote increasing resources to maintaining her empire. Diodotus argues precisely the opposite: killing the Mitylenians will alienate potential allies in other cities and ensure that rebels will not surrender at any cost, thus draining Athens' resources in extended sieges. Athens' interest lies in taking a more merciful course (although he does not frame it in those terms). The reasoning about future consequences here is diametrically opposed, but I can see no obviously false steps. And I have mixed emotions: on one hand, we're in the midst of a war and I am incensed at the Mitylenians, who were treated respectfully by us as an ally, and who then rewarded us with villainy and betrayal. Surely we should exercise just retribution, return injury for injury—and in the process teach them and the rest of the Greek world a lesson about the dangers of wronging Athens. And yet . . . to massacre an entire city, including the people who played no part in the revolt but perhaps had no power to prevent it? I can't help feeling dread and pity for those caught up in events beyond their control, who will be punished for injuries they didn't commit; surely this is not justice?

In this scenario, my Athenian self is presented with two possible and opposing judgments, both of

²⁸My analysis here does not do justice to the complexity of Diodotus's performance as a speaker, on which there is a large body of commentary. For two different but illuminating examples, see White (1984) and Connor (1984).

which are shaped by evaluative feeling and practical reasoning. Each judgment involves predictions about the future, decisions about interest and justice, deeply felt considerations of pity or revenge. So making this decision is not a matter of recognizing whether emotion is overwhelming my reason or is guiding me to discerning judgment, but of figuring out *which* emotion/reason mix should guide me in my decision about which speaker to be persuaded by.

Is the only way to judge retrospectively—that is, if with the passage of time I feel regret at being persuaded? Although regret is an unavoidable risk in political action, and hindsight may indeed be 20/20, we are not limited to retrospective sources of insight. As Yack reminds us, deliberation is aimed at the future, involving “a live reason propelled by desire out into the world” (2006, 432). What more future-oriented resources might there be for judging emotion talk?

Understood in a particular way, *ethos* is such a resource—our own *ethos* as listeners. For persuasion doesn’t simply call on or refer to what is, or identify the character of the audience and speak accordingly; it acts to shape the judges that it wants to exist, to constitute a normative identity—an *ethos*—in speech and thus to enliven it in the world. If speaking and judging are constitutive in this way, another reflective resource for making judgments is to recognize that aim. In other words, to ask not simply “who am I?” or “who are we?” but rather *who I aim to be*, and what collectivity I want to gesture or build toward with my decision. For both Cleon and Diodotus, Athens is an imperial power, making decisions as and for an empire. Yet there is a discernable difference. Cleon speaks of an Athens surrounded by enemies, driven by the one necessary course that will enable her to continue ruling her empire among “allies” with barely suppressed enmity. Diodotus speaks of an Athens with friends in every city, and of how to maintain or draw back in those friends. The two speeches thus pose different ways of thinking about the current and future identity of Athens in relation to other Greek city-states. So this is part of the judgment I am making—and not just in terms of who I think we Athenians are, but also in terms of who I imagine myself to be as a citizen. A brave warrior who will brook no affront? A member of “the many”? A Greek who shares a certain history and culture with other Greeks, a culture and history of warfare but also of meaningful alliance?

To ask how I want to have acted, what kind of self I want to manifest in political action, is to ask how I should live my life as a citizen among other citizens. This perspective doesn’t offer any neat solution for the judgment at hand; as individuals

and as a collectivity we have multiple discordant ideas about the rightful character of the polity and of ourselves. Political judgment makes us confront these questions; it asks us to make a conscious decision about the shape of the self and the polity—about what political identities we will animate. Who do I aim to be *as a citizen*? How will my judgment manifest my character as a citizen, and what will be its effect on relations with and between other citizens? And how is that related to what I want this collectivity to be?²⁹

What I decide to do—the judgment I make, the citizen-self I enact—may not in fact turn out to animate what I want it to; we don’t in that sense control the consequences of our words and actions, nor do we control their reception by others. And thinking in terms of *ethos* doesn’t resolve the question or tell me how to judge. But it gives me a different angle from which to consider the questions, one that reminds me that my judgments are part of an ongoing constitution of citizen and city, a constitution that I have responsibility for but not control over.³⁰

This might also remind us of another resource for making judgments that has to do with character. I can learn about justice by observing and emulating the actions of those I consider just (as Aristotle suggests, *NE* Book 2, chap. 4); I can think about what the manifestation of a particular citizen *ethos* would look like in action by thinking of the actions of those who seem to me to exemplify that *ethos*. Conversely, I might judge the character of a speaker in terms of how they conceive of my character, or what character they want us to take on as a collective. Examining my emotion-beliefs in light of an exemplary character (or an anti-exemplar) can be a source of insight for figuring out what to do.³¹ I can’t decide

²⁹Abizadeh makes a similar suggestion, from the perspective of the speaker: the speaker need not take an audience’s character as fixed, but can appeal to “an ideal virtuous image of the crowd which the orator rhetorically paints and inspires the crowd to emulate. Thus, the creative act of persuasion would both persuade the audience of the ethical outcome and simultaneously inspire the listeners to become an audience who would indeed choose that outcome” (2002, 294).

³⁰There is a resonance here with Zerilli’s conception of judgment as an activity in which we “affirm our freedom” by thinking through the world in terms of plurality, rather than causality or utility. “To judge objects and events in their freedom expands our sense of community, not because it tells us what is morally or politically justified and thus what we should do, but because it expands our sense of what is real or communicable... judging is a way of constructing and discovering community and its limits” (2005, 178).

³¹Beiner has a thoughtful discussion of the exemplar and the role that those of exemplary judgment can play in our own thinking (1983, 162–65).

what ethos to aim toward simply by consulting my emotions. But such an aim might help provide some resources for judging emotions, while at the same time stubborn or confusing emotions might help me learn something about the identity that is my intentional desire.

These resources for judging emotion talk do not get us beyond power or partisanship, and democratic communication does not require such “getting beyond.” But it does require attention to how emotion talk works and what it works to do. The Aristotle-inspired account I’ve offered stresses the potential perceptiveness of emotion, but also the complicated role of habituation and the multiplicity of social beliefs about emotion. These multiple cultural beliefs about emotion are involved and invoked in “praising and blaming and urging and dissuading and prosecuting and defending” (*Rhet* 1.3.9)—in other words, in political communication in all its forms. We should neither exclude emotion from legitimate political communication, nor simply privilege more affective modes. Rather, we should recognize that emotion talk is both a constituent of our judgments and also gives us the materials to remake those judgments, and thus ourselves, and thus the world.

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