
Review

Empathy and democracy: Feeling, thinking and deliberation

Michael E. Morrell

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Democracy can be a nasty and ugly political form for those who are not included in its warm embrace. Various minorities can still be persecuted while equal rights are proclaimed for all. How can democracy's promise of equality for all be more fully realized? How can democratic citizens become more attentive to others? These are only some of the questions that Michael E. Morrell poses in his fascinating book *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation*, a complex text worthy of close reading that intervenes to correct an oversight in deliberative theory and offers a 'new theoretical statement' (17). The answer to these difficult questions is simple for Morrell. Empathy can help us become better democrats.

Drawing on a vast range of research from cognitive science, neuroscience, psychology and political theory, Morrell takes the affective turn to a new level. We need to try to see the world from someone else's perspective and empathy makes this possible. For Morrell, empathy leads to openness toward others (125), reciprocity (115), tolerance (115), mutual respect (115), inclusion, attentiveness, cooperation (116) and fairness. Empathy helps us to understand the 'impacts a decision will have on others' (173). Empathy also leads to 'legitimate, justified democratic decision-making that truly takes all into consideration' (194). Without empathy, democracy will be a broken promise.

What is empathy? The author admits that we lack precise terms to capture this slippery phenomenon. Nonetheless, for Morrell, 'empathy is not a feeling, but rather a process through which others' emotional states or situations affect us' (41). Morrell does a good job tracing the twists and turns of this complicated emotion as it has evolved historically and from a variety of academic disciplines. At its best, empathy slows you down and allows you to feel the other's pain and unique experience so that you can justify to yourself that your decision took into consideration everyone's viewpoint. Empathy also helps you to understand and sense the other. For Morrell, 'the process of

empathy involves understanding another's feelings, and sensing as these feelings change, but not judging or actually sharing them' (51). Empathy, finally, 'attenuates the biasing effects of ... immediate affective reactions' (135). At its worst, empathy can lead to 'over-arousal' (167) but a proper education in empathy (127; 187) and facilitators and moderators who could act as empathy experts (188) can prevent that occurrence. But exactly what qualifies one as an empathy expert is not addressed by the author.

Empathy serves as Morrell's critical wedge to evaluate the current state of deliberative theory. Indeed, a defect in deliberative theory is the main problem that motivates Morrell's project. Morrell effectively shows how many contemporary democratic thinkers in this tradition fail to fulfill democracy's promise of equal consideration for all. They are stuck in the unhelpful dichotomy between reason and passion, which privileges rational argumentation over all other forms of communicative exchange. Rawls, Habermas, Benhabib, Gutmann and Thompson and Young fail because equal consideration for all is only possible, Morrell claims, if empathy plays a significant role in their theories. As a result of the rational bias in their work, empathy is given short shrift by these thinkers and they risk plunging us into 'talkative aggregative democracy' (129).

For Morrell, we have a 'predisposition to empathy' (182) but empathy is also learned. Hence, Morrell recommends that we embrace civic education in empathy (187). Increased funding for the arts, Morrell suggests, could 'induce greater empathy in citizens' (128), although Morrell does not specify how. A Federal Deliberation Commission (FDC) can also enhance 'attentive deliberation' by exposing citizens to a wider variety of viewpoints (190). In empathetic democracy, people attentively listen to each other, communicate effectively, acknowledge the other, compromise, avoid destructive conflict and reach legitimate policy decisions that take everyone's viewpoint into consideration. Although Morrell admits that 'in actual practice people will not be able to empathize with absolutely everyone', he holds that empathetic democracy is still more realistic than participatory democracy (181; 187).

Defending empathy, especially now, is courageous, given the strained character of the social fabric and the difficulty many people have even minimally acknowledging the presence of other people around them. Whereas I believe that Morrell is right to claim that democracy cannot work without a sense of the common good and a certain level of empathy between citizens, I wonder if empathy can or should be generalized as he does. For example, in addition to majorities empathizing with minorities, Morrell advises 'minorities to empathize with majorities' (175). This injunction risks ignoring historical oppression and the justified rage it has generated. Should oppressed groups simply forget about the past and acquiesce to their oppression? For minorities to empathize with their oppressors they may have to work through other

complicated feelings like hate and rage. I applaud Morrell's appeal to 'empathetic imagination' (12), but anger might be a constructive political feeling too (and even loathing that Morrell claims is a 'destructive emotion' (131)) because these feelings propel individuals to engage in politics. Thus, empathy may not be the appropriate emotional response to injustice and oppression. Should ordinary citizens empathize with the corporate executives whose fraud, deceit and criminality is rewarded by the politicians these corporate executives bought in the prior election? Should those incarcerated at Guantánamo Bay empathize with the individuals torturing them? These are hard questions that Morrell's deep investment in deliberative democracy may prevent him from asking but would enrich his argument if he did.

In a different vein, there is a circularity to Morrell's argument in that he seems to presuppose the intersubjectivity that empathy is intended to create. For Morrell, 'the process of empathy requires that people have at least some overlap in experiences or feelings' (141). He continues: Empathy 'does require that people share experiences that are similar enough so that there can be some matching between them, but the experiences do not have to be exactly the same' (165). If individuals have to share experiences before they can empathize with one another, empathy cannot address deep difference as when people come from such different situations that it is difficult for them to take account of each other's priorities or respect each other's customs. Empathy might not be useless in such cases; it might well mark the limitations of cross-cross or cross-cultural understanding. In other situations, where minimal traces of intersubjectivity are already present, empathy could help build and strengthen predispositions to community, mutual understanding, agreement and lead to better dialogue.

Morrell does claim that empathetic citizens can be 'adversarial and respectful' and affirms that empathy need not always lead to agreement (157; 142). Yet his rejection of agonistic democracy (194–195) and defense of deliberation conceived as storytelling (195) make me wonder how deep his commitment really is to adversarial communicative exchange. Over the course of the book, empathy begins to sound like the only truly reasonable political feeling, one that is safe, controllable, containable, productive, to the point where it risks depoliticizing. Whether Morrell overemphasizes the role of empathy as political glue and common ground at the expense of its potential to enrich disagreement as well is for the reader to decide. And this book should have many readers because it takes up a subject that has been overlooked in democratic theory.

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