Enactivist Empathy and Dialogue

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This is a very rough draft but I wanted participants to be able to read something in advance of my address in order to foster a more dialogic, and less readerly, time together. I will assume you have read this. In addition, feel free to email me in advance with any questions or areas where you'd like me to go more in-depth. Thank you!! lsbarthold@gmail.com

I. Introduction

In my presentation today, I would like to walk you through some of my current research that builds off of my recent book, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square: Civic Dialogue* (2020). As this paper a work in progress, and as I would like this session to be more of an interactive one, and as I will not assume a whole lot of familiarity either with enactivism or the model of dialogue I describe, I will spend the majority of my time offering up definitions and suggestions rather than a tightly crafted argument.

In my recent book, building off of the work of both Buber and Gadamer, I maintain that "mutual understanding" is the goal of interpersonal dialogue and argue against those who define this term as empathy. Bringing contemporary research on empathy together with Gadamer's rejection of the authorial intention theory of interpretation, I show how both cognitive and affective empathy fail to capture what we want out of interpersonal dialogue. Merely thinking the thoughts, or feeling the feelings, of the other is an impoverished way to experience a dialogic interaction with the other. More recently, I have drawn on enactivist theory to show how such accounts of empathy rely on a representational theory of mind that undermines Gadamer's anti-subjectivism (Barthold forthcoming). Both of these lines of argument are supported by contemporary research that confirms the suspicion of empathy that Gadamer's hermeneutics invites. For example, Simas, Clifford and Kirkland, in a recent article, write:

> When given the choice, people seek out environments that minimize contact with dissimilar others and ideas (e.g. Flache and Macy 2011; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Hart et al. 2009; Sears and Freedman 1967). People perceive empathy as tiring and personally costly, leading to the motivated down-regulation of compassion and empathy (Cameron, Harris, and Payne 2016; Cameron and Payne 2011). Moreover, we are more likely to understand and share in the experiences of ingroup--vs. outgroup—members creating an empathy gap. (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2012). This empathy gap leads to real-world consequences, such as reducing the likelihood of helping an outgroup member (Kunstman and Plant 2008; Sterling and Gaertner 1984; Stürmer, Snyder, and Omoto 2005) and the devaluation of their lives (Pratto and Glasford 2008). And even when individuals are willing and able to place themselves in the shoes of another, this can actually *increase* conflict by reinforcing negative stereotypes or triggering anger (Skorinko and Sinclair 2013; Vitaglione and Barnett 2003). (2019, 3)

To avoid not only the theoretical but even more importantly the practical problems with relying on empathy to overcome outgroup difference outlined above, I argue that the Buberian undertones of Gadamer's hermeneutics—resonating far beyond Gadamer's use of the I-Thou dialogue to illustrate what goes on in understanding—lead us to define mutual understanding as the ability to take up the other's claim to human existence. Only when one can allow the other to make a claim in such a way that requires the affirmation of our common, underlying humanity, does mutual understanding occur. Mutual understanding, again drawing on the language of Gadamer, is a playful event in which interlocutors find themselves changed through the immersive nature of the game, which is driven by the trans-subjective power of play itself. The nature of this change is the formation of a newly created horizon in which interlocutors are brought to a deeper connection with each other. As such, I argue that the sort of claim that is made in dialogue is an existential, as opposed to epistemic, one. Dialogue aims to connect persons and not positions; the goal of dialogue is not to reach consensus of belief but to existentially connect with the other *qua* human.

Let me pause here to qualify that I defend dialogue as a pre-cursor to deliberative discourse that aims at consensus. Eventually, policy will have to made, which (ideally) requires the defense of a specific position through a deliberative process that examines the benefits and trade-offs of a specific policy, leading to its enactment. But where polarization is dominant, it is often impossible to even get people in the same room (as the above quotation, in

addition to other research, suggests), much less to listen to and speak productively with the other. Civic dialogue differs from other forms of discourse in so far as it asks people to speak about first person experiences rather than speaking for or about others; it invites curious listening rather than assertion, persuasion and debate; and it relies on a carefully designed structure composed of communication agreements, timed go-arounds, and questions set in advance in order to maximize reflection and slow down reactivity. These practices (which I will discuss further below) are frequently utilized by those who work in the field of conflict transformation. Their efficacy is born out by the findings of cognitive neuroscientists and conflict mediators who confirm that when emotionally triggered we are less able to utilize critical thinking skills. [Cite] Dialogue minimizes threats by creating an environment of trust and openness without pretending that differences do not exist. While it might seem counterintuitive to ask individuals to speak about their own personal experiences—experiences that reveal important particular differences—in order to achieve mutual understanding, in fact, this practice has been demonstrated as a way to allow a common humanity to emerge. [Cite] The sharing of first-person narratives is not a strategy to suppress or deny the different experiences of participants but to expose and acknowledge them. What the theory and practice of dialogue affirms is that humans telling their own unique stories *qua* human does allow a deeper, shared humanity to surface. Civic dialogue, therefore, is a more effective way to initially gather in order to build community capacity for further civic discourse about policy.

That dialogue can be an effective way to bring polarized parties together is born out by current research that demonstrates that people are less likely to want to engage with members of the out-group when the interaction is expected to be a "threatening or competitive" one (Simas, Clifford and Kirkland 2019, 8); if they do engage, then they are likely to feel increased antagonism towards members of the out-group. Not only is jumping into persuasive deliberation or debate ineffective, in so far as they often require argumentative attempts to persuade the other, but it may prove counter-productive in reducing out-group bias, leading to increased polarization. That mutual understanding entails a visceral experience of shared humanity, and not merely a cognitive belief, is a particularly salient advantage given the power of a variety of cognitive biases that often

make rational argumentation impotent to change the mind of the other. [Cite] I maintain that the mutual understanding that serves as the aim of interpersonal dialogue is analogous to Gadamer's account of the event of truth in which one not only finds oneself changed but taken up into a new horizon indicative of a deeper connection to the meaning of a text (Barthold 2010). What is definitive about both is the way they go beyond a mere epistemic claim about belief change. It is not merely that a false belief has been replaced by a true one; rather, one's horizon has shifted in such a way that one's whole being has changed—what Gadamer refers to as one's horizon (perspective). Mutual understanding, like truth, requires one to be brought into a deeper connection with the other, as indicated by the emergence of a new horizon. In the next section, I draw on enactivist theory to further deepen my definition of mutual understanding and further clarify why we should avoid equating it with standard notions of empathy.

II. Enactivist theory

Of the variety of strains of enactivist theories of mind on offer, I take my point of departure from Shaun Gallagher who offers this definition:

> enactivist approaches are similar to the ideas of extended mind and distributed cognition insofar as all of these approaches argue that cognition is not entirely 'in the head' but rather is distributed across the brain, body, and environment (e.g. Clark and Chalmers 1998). However, in contrast to the extended mind hypothesis, which embraces functionalism and finds a role for minimal representations, enactivists reject functionalism and claim that the material specifics of bodily processes shape and contribute to the constitution of consciousness and cognition in a way that is irreducible to representations. (Gallagher 2017, 6-7)

Enactivism, in other words, rejects representationalism, and therefore forecloses accounts of cognitive empathy, which are based on an intentional and representational theory of mind. If there is no clear way to demarcate body from mind from situation, then empathy,

whereby one mind allegedly thinks the thoughts of the other's mind, becomes impossible to make sense of.

When Gallagher writes that "brain, body, and environment are said to be dynamically coupled in a way that forms a system" (8), he is emphasizing how a change in one part effects change in the whole and that enactivism entails a diachronic, dynamical system that includes processes and not just material components. Components external to the mind are actually constitutive of cognition—they do not merely cause cognition. Gallagher rejects a synchronic relation of constitution, which signifies no difference over time between components and where causation and constitution are taken to be different and separate. From a synchronic point of view, to say an entity is constituted by *x*, is to say nothing about *x* being its cause; it is also to maintain a stable and non-changing relation between *x* and what constitutes *x* (8). Against the synchronic model, Gallagher advances a diachronic model, where a change in one component creates a change in another, and it describes how different relations are created and manifest over time. Accordingly, constitution and causality are not regarded as separate relations. As different parts and relations change, the whole will change, changing, in turn, the parts. He maintains: "In a dynamical gestalt composed of processes that unfold over time, and characterized by recursive reciprocal causality relations, changes in any processual part . . will lead to changes in the whole, and changes in the whole will imply changes in the processual parts" (10).

Enactivism has several forerunners including Merleau-Ponty, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. For example, in a chapter on the pragmatist underpinnings of enactivism, Gallagher quotes Dewey to explain the robustness of an enactivist theory of mind: "An idea is not primarily an intellectual entity in the head, but 'an organic anticipation of what will happen when certain operations are executed under and with respect to observed conditions' (Dewey 1938a, 109)" (Gallagher 55). And in describing Dewey's notion of "situation" Gallagher notes its enactivist emphasis: "Organism and environment are not two self-sufficient or easily distinguishable items. Rather, they are always found together in a dynamical transactional relation . . . . the situation is not equivalent to the environment. That is, it is not that the organism is placed in a situation. Rather the situation is constituted

by organism-environment, which means that the situation already includes the agent or experiencing subject" (54, 55-56).

Thus in a Deweyian vein, albeit with more neuroscientific precision and depth, enactivists define the mind as composed of body, society, and culture; cognition equals the "dynamic relation between brain and environment" (11). Neural activity, kinesiology, present circumstances, people, desires, affects, as well as one's past, social history, etc. all comprise the mind. The emphasis is on the fact that "the mind is relational. It's a way of being in relation to the world" (Thompson 2014, 1, quoted in Gallagher 2017, 12). Shared meaning, in other words, refers to the entire, dynamic situation and not to the meaning that is merely shared by, or resides solely in, two different minds/brains.

If, as enactivists maintain, cognition is not just "neuronal processes in the brain of an individual" (Gallagher 2017, 12), then it seems problematic to speak of an empathetic exchange whereby two distinct minds exchange representations. Gallagher summons Dewey and other pragmatists to maintain that "we are *in the world* in a way that is not reducible to occupying an objective position in the geography of surrounding space, and in a way such that the world is irreducible to an abstraction of itself represented in one's brain" (Gallagher 2014, 59).

In further support of an enactivist theory of mind, Gallagher turns to empirical studies on out-group behavior. For the purposes of this paper, I will note how such studies challenge the efficacy of empathy when encountering the other in a particularly polarized atmosphere. In such a context, it seems doubtful to expect one to be able to put oneself in the shoes of the other one finds so insidious. Does a Black person really want to make the intellectual and emotional effort to put herself in the shoes of the white nationalist who defends the superiority of the "white race"? Even should she be willing to attempt as much, empirical studies show that "we are simply less responsive to out-group members and we display significantly less motor cortex activity when observing out-group members (Molnar-Szakacs et al. 2007). Most strikingly, in-group members fail to understand out-group member actions, and this is particularly prominent for disliked and dehumanized

out-groups. The more dehumanized the out-group is, the less intuitive the grasp of out-group member intentions and actions (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010)" (Gallagher 2017, 122). In other words, even where one is whole-heartedly devoted to consciously trying to put oneself in the other's shoes, there are significant limitations to doing so. And what one comes away with will likely be a highly reductionistic viewpoint of the other, which is not conducive for mutual understanding. Other research concurs on the intractability of implicit biases of all sorts and reveals how tenacious and dominant implicit biases are—even when we wish they were not.[1] If beliefs, particularly identity-based and oriented beliefs, are often what divide us and fuel polarization, and if we want to change beliefs that obstruct the creation of a well-functioning, democratic society, then we need an approach to change that takes seriously that way that beliefs are irreducible to "functional states of the brain" and recognizes that beliefs "may be constituted in terms of disposition or action-tendencies that vary across different situations" (Gallagher 63).

While I have in no way offered a full-blown defense of enactivism here, my rehearsal of some of its highlights is meant to pose some challenges to those theorists who esteem the import of empathy for a dialogic encounter. Hans Herbert Kögler, for example, in his effort to defend a "critical reflexive self," proposes an account of "hermeneutic empathy," whereby through a dialogic exchange with the other one gains critical distance by taking on the role or perspective of the other. He claims that the dialogic interaction is one whereby one is able to take on the role of the other, thus giving one critical distance from one's own perspective—hence the critical, reflexive self that emerges. While Kögler has brought many important insights to hermeneutic studies, and has helped make hermeneutics a serious player in socio-political philosophy, I find his defense of hermeneutic empathy problematic. Simas, Clifford and Kirkland, for example, help us understand why this type of non-affective empathy runs into problems:

… the expectations for perspective-taking are not so clear. Some have described this disposition as a relational amplifier (Pierce et al. 2013) that enhances the cooperative or competitive nature of a relationship. In line with this perspective, some research has found that people high in perspective-taking are more prone to strategic (selfish) behavior in competitive games (Epley,

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[1] See, for example, Brownstein and Saul 2016a, b.

Caruso, and Bazerman 2006) and more willing to engage in unethical behavior in competitive contexts (Pierce et al. 2013). In fact, there are a number of contexts in which perspective-taking may fail or even backfire (Sassenrath, Hodges, and Pfattheicher 2016). As a result, perspective-taking may not reduce political polarization either. (27)

In other words, we should exercise caution in attempting to encourage dialogue participants to engage in role-taking, since perspective taking can also be strategically utilized to manipulate the other. I am not claiming that role-taking, much less empathy, is never appropriate. Rather, it should not be defined as the essential core of dialogue.[2] If we are to think about utilizing empathy, we must devote adequate attention to its role in the whole of the dialogic environment. Furthermore, since dialogue aims at deeper connections, it should not be part of a strategy to create further distance from ourselves or the other.[3] Far from a quibble about pedantic terminology, the significance of my challenge lies in how we are to understand an operationalized account of dialogue. How we conceive of mutual understanding will prove essential for figuring out the type of dialogic event most apt for countering polarizing and fragmenting tendencies that thwart the very possibility of pluralistic democratic communities.

To put this in the language of Gadamer, I am claiming that when it comes to interpersonal dialogue, the subject matter of understanding (*die Sache*) is not the contents of the mind of the other but the whole event of dialogue. When it comes to interpreting the text, Gadamer instructed us to direct our attention to the text itself, *die Sache*, and not the author's mind. He rejected the psychologizing assumptions that underpin efforts to define textual understanding as the ability to access the mind of the other—the authorial intention theory of interpretation. I am claiming that, following the trajectories of both hermeneutics and enactivism, we must take the whole dialogic environment as the subject matter.

III. "Enactivist Empathy" in Dialogue

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[2] In fact, as I have argued in my book, Narrative 4 utilizes a carefully structured exercise of narrative exchanges to help one understand the perspective of the other. And while they tout the benefits of empathy, I show that participant feedback is actually more indicative of mutual understanding than empathy per se.

[3] As I argue elsewhere, Kögler's insistence on using empathy to promote critical distanciation rather than connection stems from his failure to have adequately expunged all traces of subjectivism as born out in his reliance on a representational theory of mind (Barthold 2020b).

What does an account of dialogue look like that rejects standard conceptions of empathy, which assume a dyadic, intersubjective back-and-forth, and takes seriously the fact that "all kinds of affective processes, and even variations in circulation and heartbeat, can influence perception (Garfinkel et al. 2014)" (quoted in (Gallagher 2017, 118)? Such an account must acknowledge the holistic and enacted nature of organism and environment without defining the dialogic process solely in terms of the exchange of beliefs (where beliefs are defined in terms of functional brain states). It must recognize and affirm the fact that, as Gallagher writes,

> such things as affects and the effects of respiration and heart rate are not *represented* as part of my perception; they are non-representational factors that have an effect on perceptual response. . .On the enactivist view, the perceptual system is not just in the brain; it includes the organism (brain-body) embedded in or engaged with the environment that is characterized by certain regularities and affordances and action possibilities. (Gallagher 2017, 118-119)

In other words, taking seriously an enactivist concept of "situation" means acknowledging that the standard accounts of cognitive or affective empathy based on a representational theory of mind remain inadequate to the task of mutual understanding.[4] Any effort to advocate for a role of empathy in dialogue, should heed the words of Simas, Clifford and Kirkland who claim that "polarization is not a consequence of a *lack* of empathy among the public, but a product of the biased ways in which we experience empathy" (9, emphasis added) Their research motivates me to ask, then, if empathy is not only theoretically, but also practically, suspect, does this mean that there is nothing at all of value to the notion of "empathy"? What might a non-biased experience of empathy look like? Might there be a way to re-envision a different type of empathy, one in-line with enactivist theory?

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[4] Gallagher writes: "In section 3.3.1 I pointed to the importance of Dewey's notion of situation, where situation is not equivalent to the objective environment, but includes the agent or experiencing subject in such a way that there is no way for the agent to gain an objective perspective on the situation. This is reflected in the idea that by perception alone the organism doesn't know or control its own viability conditions. It discovers them and can control them only by taking action" (Gallagher 2017, 129-130).

Revising my earlier rejection of empathy writ large, I now want to qualify that claim and propose that we think of what goes on in a successful interpersonal dialogue as "enactivist empathy." As I define it, "enactivist empathy" refers to the phenomenon whereby the participants become engaged more fully in the situation. I also take "enactivist empathy" as a useful term for conceptualizing the coherence that a hermeneutic account of dialogue seeks, a coherence achieved by a playful engagement as opposed to persuasion motivated by individual volitions. "Enactivist empathy" does not name the outcome of dialogue (and therefore is not equivalent to mutual understanding), but is a useful concept for describing the dialogic work needed to achieve mutual understanding. What one really yearns for from dialogue, its "take-way," so to speak, is the mutual understanding that connects participants through their existential claims of humanity. Participants want to leave a dialogue with the visceral experience of a shared humanity. Enactivist empathy describes the process that occurs without having to summon a representational discursive strategy that assumes a dyadic transference of fragments of beliefs, allegedly contained in individual minds. The dynamic coherence leading to mutual understanding addresses the fundamental fragmentation that produces broken and incapacitated organisms (both humans and institutions). If the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," we could say that it is futile to attempt to attenuate polarized political discourse by developing a dialogic approach that utilizes individualistic cognition and thus further exacerbates the distanciated and fragmentary nature of thought. We need a better way to think together, a way that does not rely on upholding a *paean* to individuated, critically distanced and fragmented thought. The antidote for fragmentary thought is coherence, which accords with the biological underpinnings of enactivism described by Gallagher:

> The free-energy principle applies to any biological system that resists a tendency to disorder (Friston, Kilner, and Harrison 2006). It states that for an adaptive self-organizing (i.e., autopoietic) system to maintain itself it needs to minimize entropy or free-energy. . .In theoretical biological terms, if we think of the living organism as a self-organizing system, it survives by anticipating sensory input or by taking

> action, which in turn changes its sensory input. . . Living systems and cognitive
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> systems share this same organizational principle. (2017 127) [5]

Enactivist empathy refers not to the process whereby individuals take up the role of the other and curtail the implicit biases affecting their individual thought processes (e.g., like the stereotype effect), but describes the structure that allows the entire dynamical system to self-regulate in a way that not only increases the connection amongst community members but also empowers them. Put this way, mutual understanding can also be acknowledged as emancipatory. I maintain that emancipatory understanding occurs when, to use Gadamer's language, we not only experience a change as a result of moving to a newly formed horizon, but a change that manifests as a more vibrant engagement in the whole dynamic process of the dialogic exchange and includes the ability to connect more robustly with others. While an adequate development of the sort of discourse required for emancipatory understanding is not possible here given space limitations, I conclude with a brief description of the civic dialogue that can produce it.

The specific, facilitated structure of civic dialogue utilizes timed periods for silent reflection on targeted questions formulated in advance, timed go-arounds to allow each participant to answer the question from their first-person experience, open back and forth dialogue, and explicit communication agreements. [6] Through advance planning, facilitators must familiarize themselves with the community in order to best design specific questions to start the dialogue that avoid triggering language and help build a space of trust. Explicit communication agreements are introduced and participants are asked if they can agree to them, and if there is anything else they want to add that will foster a productive dialogue. Participants are asked to take responsibility for insuring these agreements are upheld, and they are also invited to offer feedback on revising these agreements at any time. (The open-

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[5] Physicist and dialogue theorist, David Bohm, also uses the term coherence to describe what happens in a well-functioning system. I take the term fragmentation from his work. See Bohm 1980 and 1996. The language of "coherence" also accords with a Gadamerian account of truth without defending a standard "coherent theory of truth," which I have previously criticized (Barthold 2010).

[6] Essential Partners has been the leader in developing this sort of "Reflective, Structured Dialogue" (whatisessential.org).

ended nature of the agreements helps diminish any implicit ways that they might reinforce oppressive behavior.) The initial part of the dialogue includes time for silent reflection and then timed-go arounds that insure everyone has the same amount of time to speak. Time for silent reflection helps promote a calm and relaxed physiology and brain state that is most conducive for listening and understanding. The timing of speakers creates an initial base-line of equality in speaking to avoid one or more voices dominating, establishing a more level playing field from the start. Questions and agreements ask participants to refrain from modes of persuasion or argument that privilege their own individual triumph and success at the expense of others and invite individuals to speak from their own first-person experiences. They are reminded the goal is mutual understanding not winning. Fraught and competitive debate-style discourse is off limits, as is generalizing about the other. Dialogue, in other words, differs from both debate and deliberation in so far as it is driven by listening and reflection, rather than asserting and arguing, not just to the other but to the whole dialogic environment.

For this reason, I describe enactivist empathy as occurring when participants "listen to the whole field." The focus of enactivist empathy is not the set of beliefs inhering in a single individual mind (or several minds, for that matter), but the whole of the dialogic event, as it is unfolding in the wider, dialogic space. Enactivist empathy occurs in dialogue when individuals cease trying to win and instead get caught up in the on-going activity of the play of dialogue. Where only one side or individual wins, mutual understanding has not occurred, and fragmentation remains. Akin to Gadamer's account of play, enactivist empathy describes how the dialogic "players" allow the dialogue to take over, eventually creating coherence. Enactivist empathy, unlike standard accounts of empathy, does not require an individual to "think the thoughts" or "feel the feelings" of the other-as-separate-individual. Enactivist empathy refers to the ability to become attuned to and engaged in the whole dialogue as it playfully unfolds. It is a way of describing what goes on in the dialogic "zone," so to speak—akin to how athletes describe the experience of being caught up in play where the play itself takes over in a way that far from diminishing agency actually increases it. Similarly, enactivist empathy occurs when one is able to sense the whole of the dialogic activity that is unfolding and to experience oneself actively engaged and caught up

in it. We could say, then, that in enactivist empathy an enacted *cogitamus* takes the place of a representing *cogito*.

In other words, civic dialogue requires privileging listening, reflecting and observing in order to promote connection rather than defending and asserting one's own beliefs in a way that promotes individuation. Trained facilitators help participants spend time in silent reflection, which slows down reactive physiological responses whose defensiveness towards one's "own thought" shuts down further inquiry. Participants are asked to observe and notice "the field," which includes not only one's own assumptions and beliefs, but one's body, emotions and the entire dialogic activity that is happening. Individuals should aim "to speak to the center and not the sides," as leading dialogue practitioner William Isaacs has described it (Isaacs 1999). But even more important is that such speaking should be marked by wonder, i.e., the asking of curious questions rather than the assertion of statements. This means letting go of insisting upon one's own pet interests, agenda, arguments, and beliefs and instead allowing the emergence and unfolding of a greater coherence. This does not mean repressing or denying individual thoughts, feelings, desires, nor even willfully suspending them, but noticing and allowing them without identifying with or defending them. The slowed-down process of reflection and observation allows all participants to be involved; it is both a practice, and experience, of trust in the whole.

The effects of such a dialogue are twofold. First, the individuals through a holistic experience of a common endeavor come away with not so much a new belief that "the other and I are part of a greater whole," but a visceral, enacted experience of such connection. The exchange amongst particular individuals gives rise to the lived experience of a shared humanity, one that transcends that of any individual, and where the new whole that emerges is greater than the sum of its parts. Second, new meaning, ideas and thoughts do emerge, but they are not essentially attached to or derived from any single individual mind. There is no genius who is credited with solving or fixing the problem. The coherence that emerges from such a dialogue allows individuals, and groups or systems of individuals, to work together more productively and to break through impasses that already have given or might yet give rise to incommensurability, violence and oppression. What is gained is

not more accurate representations, sharper fragments so to speak, but improved, because freer, engagement. For this reason, we can think of the sort of understanding achieved as a form of emancipatory understanding—where individuals experience increased freedom and power that results from belonging to and engaging with the whole.

IV. Conclusion

But, some may object, if we do away with a "critically reflexive agent," won't we be susceptible to mass hysteria and cult-like submission? This is an important objection and I acknowledge the need for a fuller account of connection that specifically addresses this worry. Specifically, it will be important to do more work to expose the falsity of the assumption that "*either* we bolster the individual's "critically reflexive self" *or* we succumb to despotism," an assumption that relies on an enlightenment and neuro-centric model of human cognition that trades on the individual's autonomous and explicit rationality. Following the hermeneutic impetus to reject such a reductionistic account of subjectivity, I maintain we should take seriously our need for a dynamic connection with the whole. Privileging connection over distanciation does not require denying the possibility of any sort of dialogic constraint in order to achieve emancipatory understanding. The particular approach to dialogue I have described clarifies such constraint as the ability to create a dialogic event that all participants are able to contribute to and fully partake of. It utilizes play rather than intentional role-taking and an empathic gesture towards another individual. Such an event is driven by the dynamic play of the dialogue itself, which energizes participants to keep playing in order to achieve emancipatory understanding (albeit a never completed task). In conclusion, I propose we think of dialogue as aiming at deeper and more robust connection, one that utilizes enactivist empathy, rather than attempting a critical distanciation, which focuses on the ability to representationally reconstruct meaning. A dialogue aimed at mutual understanding and utilizing enactivist empathy provides the best form of discourse to help us avoid the sort of fragmentary polarization that is currently plaguing our democracy.

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