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Amanda Anderson: The Way We Argue Now

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INTRODUCTION

THE WAY WE ARGUE NOW is at once diagnostic and revisionist, polemical and utopian. Through close analyses of contemporary academic debates, this collection of essays examines the governing assumptions and styles of argumentation that characterize what is broadly known as “theory” across several humanities and social science disciplines. The turn to theory dates back to the 1960s and is associated with several interrelated schools of thought, among them poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory. These schools have profoundly influenced disciplinary methodologies and self-conceptions, and in this book I will pay especial attention to the form such influence has taken in literary studies, cultural studies, and political theory. In exploring scholarly formations and controversies associated with these approaches, this book assesses debates internal to academic culture and hopes to advance a better understanding of theory as a contested and not a unified field, one that moreover is developing in ways that recent assessments of the field, most strikingly those that have announced theory’s demise, have failed to capture.¹

At the same time, however, the book engages in an internal critique of certain tendencies within the field of theory. These essays repeatedly draw attention to the underdeveloped and often incoherent evaluative stance of contemporary theory, its inability to clearly avow the norms and values underlying its own critical programs. In particular, I contest the prevalent skepticism about the possibility or desirability of achieving reflective distance on one’s social or cultural positioning. As a result of poststructuralism’s insistence on the forms of finitude—linguistic, psychological, and cultural—that limit individual agency, and multiculturalism’s insistence on the primacy of ascribed group identity and its accompanying perspectives, the concept of critical distance has been seriously discredited, even as it necessarily informs many of the very accounts that announce its

¹ I have in mind especially Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), as well as the flurry of confirming reviews and write-ups it received, including one entitled, “Cultural Theorists, Start Your Epitaphs,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2004. Eagleton claims not only that the era associated with names like Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes is long past, but that what is needed is a turn to questions of morality, love, religion, death, and suffering. I will be arguing, contra Eagleton and his gleeful admirers, that theory has already to a significant extent made this turn internally. Eagleton’s argument is premised on a highly selective understanding of cultural theory.

bankruptcy. The alliance between the poststructuralist critique of reason and the form of sociological reductionism that governs the politics of identity threatens to undermine the vitality of both academic and political debate insofar as it becomes impossible to explore shared forms of rationality. Given these conditions, in fact, this book might well have been called “The Way We Fail to Argue Now.”²

To counter the tendencies of both poststructuralism and identity politics, I advance a renewed assessment of the work of philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose interrelated theories of communicative action, discourse ethics, and democratic proceduralism have provoked continued and often dismissive critique from theorists in the fields of literary studies, cultural studies, and political theory. The book is in no way an uncritical embrace of Habermas’s theory, however. Rather, it offers a renewed assessment of the notions of critical distance and procedural democracy in light of the arguments that have been waged against them. In part I do this by giving airtime to those debates in which Habermas and like-minded critics have engaged poststructuralism. But I also try to give Habermas a new hearing by showing the ways in which his theories promote an understanding of reflective distance as an achieved and lived practice, one with an intimate bearing on questions of ethos and character. Typically dismissed as impersonal, abstract, and arid, rational discourse of the kind associated with the neo-Kantianism of Habermas and his followers is often employed as a contrast to valorized ideals of embodied identities, feelings and passions, ethics and politics—in short, all the values that are seen to imbue theoretical practice with existential meaningfulness and moral force. This very opposition, which has effectively structured many influential academic debates, involves a serious misreading and reduction of the rationalist tradition, which at its most compelling seeks precisely to understand communicative reason and the aspiration to critical distance as an embedded practice, as an ongoing achievement rather than a fantasmatic imposition. This aspiration, moreover, also characterizes collective forms of liberal politics, including the practices and procedures that constitute the democratic tradition and are so vital to its ongoing health and stability.

More generally, and throughout the book, I draw out the practical

² For a related critique, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Michaels argues that with the “end of history” and the replacement of ideology with identity, we no longer disagree about anything because only identities, and not beliefs, matter, and because identity is taken to determine how we view the world. I share Michaels’s concern with the demise of disagreement and the problem of relativism, but I wage my critique from a different vantage point and ultimately seek to reintroduce dimensions of ethos, and stances toward identity, into a renewed conception of argument.

imagination of theories in order to contest the assumption that theory is overly abstract, irrelevant, or elitist and to draw attention to an all but ubiquitous pull, even in theories from very different and even antagonistic traditions, toward questions of embodiment and enactment—questions of practice, that is. With varying degrees of explicitness and self-awareness, I argue, contemporary theories present themselves as ways of living, as practical philosophies with both individualist and collective aspirations. Indeed, many recent theoretical projects join in a desire to correct for, or answer to, the overly abstract elements of earlier forms of theory. This movement manifests itself in various and not entirely commensurate ways; within literary studies, to take a central example, it appears in a keen attention to the social position of writers, readers, and characters, an increasing focus on the sensibility or location of the critic or theorist, and a concern with the ethics of reading and criticism more broadly. It is my contention that these developments reflect a persistent existential movement toward thicker characterological conceptions of theoretical postures and stances, though it is rarely put in these terms. Indeed, the interest in characterological enactment often operates below the radar, or with only half-lit awareness. One symptom of the underdeveloped yet nonetheless insistent nature of this aspect of contemporary theory is the fact that the term “*ethos*,” which reflects a general interest in the ethical texture of theory’s project, appears regularly across recent work in literature and political theory.³

I am interested in exploring this turn toward the existential dimensions of theory, claiming it as a kind of dialectical advance, and using it to reconsider our understanding of those forms of political theory—rationalism and proceduralism—that have been framed as most ethos-deficient. But the story is somewhat more complicated and internally contested than this brief summary might lead one to expect. These complexities have largely to do with a point I raised at the outset: namely, that highly constrained sociological forms have governed the analysis of subjectivity and personal experience in literary and cultural studies after poststructuralism. In the late 1980s, an interest in first-person perspectives and in the lived experiences of diverse social groups emerged among critics who felt that the high altitudes at which theory operated failed to capture the density and meaningfulness of individual and collective life. There were a series of famous “confessional writings” by critics, which

³ Ethos and character are internally related terms, as I discuss in chapter 6. The former is more focused on the ambient social conditions and norms that guide practice, the latter on the inculcation—and reflective cultivation—of values in the form of habits, dispositions, styles. Ethos includes a collective dimension as well as an individual one, while character is primarily individualist.

often opposed themselves to theoretical approaches.⁴ Within theory itself, there was also an increasing attention to subjective effects and enactment, and a subsequent tendency to focus the lens on the middle distance and the close up, to relinquish the panoramas and the aerial views. Thus, not only did a new subjectivism emerge in opposition to theory, it also began to affect theory itself as an internal pressure. The most telling example here would be the dramatic late turn in the work of Michel Foucault, which set aside the far-reaching examination of modern power and modern institutions to explore the “care of the self” within antiquity and, to a lesser degree, within modernity, as well. While Foucault’s previous work had been interested in the forms of subjectivity engendered by modern disciplinary power, the later Foucault was interested in the manner in which individuals understood, conducted, and therefore in some sense owned, their moral, social, and physical lives.⁵

What should be noted about much of this work on the individual subject, however, is that it gave preeminence to sociological or group identity—variously defined by the categories of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality. One of the recurrent themes of this book is that a narrow understanding of selfhood and practice results from an overemphasis on sociological, ascribed, or group identity. Intellectual practices over the past several decades have been profoundly enriched and advanced through analysis of the ways that identity categories shape bodies of knowledge, cultural life, and relations of power. But it is also the case that contemporary forms of sociological and cultural reductionism limit how critics and theorists imagine the relation between intellectual and ethico-political life.⁶ The conviction that identity is fundamentally

⁴ For both analysis and examples of confessional criticism see H. Aram Veerer, ed., *Confessions of the Critics* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁵ Foucault’s “turn” is located between volumes 1 and 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1 is seen as closer in method and theory to *Discipline and Punish*, and governed by a conception of modern disciplinary power’s constitution of subjects. Volumes 2 and 3, in shifting to the classical period, examine individual everyday practices in the realms of ethics and sexuality. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978); *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985); *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1986).

⁶ Of course, there are also sociological accounts of what I am calling “sociological reductionism.” The locus classicus is Daniel Bell’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). For further discussions of the sociological and political conditions promoting identity politics, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Post-Socialist Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Seyla Benhabib, “The Liberal Imagination and the Four Dogmas of Multiculturalism,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (1999): 401–13.

status-based, pre-given in some fundamental way by the groups or categories that make up the sociological map, constrains the resources of practical and ethical discourses in key ways.⁷ This discursive poverty is evidenced by the two ethicopolitical options that often seem to be on offer: on the one hand, there is a strong theoretical tradition, deriving from poststructuralism and queer theory, that advocates the subversion of identity by any means possible—the denaturalization of what are nonetheless inescapably imposed identities by means of parody, irony, or resignification.⁸ On the other hand, by those more interested in the virtues of mosaic diversity and more convinced of the importance of socialized belonging, there is a quasi-communitarian commitment to the notion that forms of cultural affiliation must be acknowledged, defended, or cushioned, particularly from what is seen as the evacuating force of liberal or rational agendas.⁹

The “politics of identity” (to suggest something less reified and discredited than “identity politics”) is a theoretically and practically significant dimension of contemporary historical and sociological life. It is not my aim or desire to somehow argue it out of existence (as though that were possible). But limitations ensue when the politics of identity is imagined to cover all available intellectual and ethicopolitical space. The privileging of only those forms of critique that are associated with the postmodern modes of irony and negative freedom, moreover, results in a widespread and deleterious rejection of the resources of the Kantian and liberal traditions. I question the assumptions fueling this recurrent bias and advance a defense of critical reason, discourse ethics, and those political forms and institutions that seek reflectively to realize liberal and democratic principles.

From a somewhat different but equally important angle, I explore how contemporary theory is already pursuing a less constrained understanding

⁷ A clarification is in order here about the use of the term “sociological.” Many theorists whom I mean to include under such a description would refuse the idea that their understandings of identity can be adequately described by this term—this would be especially true of critics for whom psychoanalysis is a fundamentally informing paradigm. But insofar as such critics subscribe to a notion of the symbolic, which is discursive but also fundamentally coterminous with the cultural and the social order, and insofar as sexual identities are distributed within this order and are crucially determinative of individual experience, then they are still operating by means of what I here designate as a sociological map, even if they call it something else, such as the symbolic order, the heterosexual matrix, or the heteronormative regime. The key element at play in such theories is the assumption that identity means, above all, categorical or group identity, and that self-understanding and individual enactment play themselves out primarily in relation to this identity.

⁸ The most influential instance of such an approach can be found in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁹ See James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

of first-person experience (singular and plural), one which finds expression in ways that consistently exceed the sociological grid. This is evident in what many have hailed as a general turn to ethics, but it is also evident in recent forms of theory for which, as I have already suggested, a kind of cultivated ethos or characterological stance seems central, if not fully theorized. Among these, and of central interest in the essays collected here, I would count the later Foucault, cosmopolitanism, and, most provocatively, proceduralist ethics and politics (with its emphasis on sincerity and civility). A less reflective but symptomatically interesting version of this attentiveness to ethos appears in contemporary pragmatism, which I take up in order to underscore the constrained ways in which nonsociological understandings of identity make their presence felt in practical philosophies of the present. The book concludes by resituating the concepts of ethos and character within an analysis of proceduralist theory and liberal institutions, both as a way of answering to some of the most pointed critiques of reason and liberalism's purported impersonality, and as a way of introducing the notion of a "culture of argument," by which I mean the discursive practices and habits that underpin the unfinished project of modernity and the evolving institutions of liberal democracies.

I should perhaps clarify what I mean by "nonsociological." In advocating a fuller incorporation of understandings of character and ethos into our theories and practices, I mean to suggest that individuals and collectivities can and do cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that can in no simple way be attributed to any easily identifiable and limiting sociological determination. Of course it is always the case that conceptions of virtue and character bear the marks of their historical and cultural locations, and that individuals and collectivities are necessarily faced with discrete fields of action. But that does not mean that character and ethos are always class or culture-bound in some limiting way, nor does it mean that forms of character always bespeak a determination by forces of power, or alternately, an ideological denial of such determination. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theories have promoted the view that manners, habits, and characterological identifications are not only social in origin, but also work to establish forms of distinction that articulate hierarchies of power.¹⁰ Bourdieu, like Foucault, has provided immensely valuable tools for the understanding of power within everyday life. But it is by no means clear to me that the characterological dimensions of normative ethical and political theories (be they personal, political, or institutional virtues), or of course those theories themselves, are so susceptible to sociological reduction.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

The essays collected here were written over several years—both during and after the completion of an earlier book, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*.¹¹ It may be useful to situate this project in relation to that book, which in many ways provides historical context for the present study. Focusing on intellectual and aesthetic practices in nineteenth-century Britain, *The Powers of Distance* argues that nineteenth-century writers gave ethical depth and justification to modern intellectual postures precisely by insisting that they profoundly affected character. In demonstrable ways, the postures of distancing that characterized scientific objectivity, omniscient realism, and aesthetic disinterestedness were construed by nineteenth-century thinkers as integrally linked to the moral fate of the practitioner. For example, scientific writers sought to project an ideal of “moralized objectivity,” to borrow the term used by historian of science Lorraine Daston, while writers such as Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill fundamentally integrated ideals of exemplary character into their conceptions, respectively, of disinterestedness and epistemological advance.¹² There were also instances of character-damaging theoretical postures that contrasted sharply with character-enhancing practices: for example, Charles Dickens was haunted by the idea that the cultivation of a systems-view of the social world—one that analyzed relations of hierarchy and power—was both necessary to the project of realism and potentially highly harmful to individuals, whose critical practices might reify into habits of suspicion that would thwart the bonds of affection that underwrite ideals of family and community.

Uniting these disparate nineteenth-century views is a commitment to the notion that intellectual and aesthetic postures are always also lived practices. As such they allow and even invite the same kinds of ethical assessments that individuals routinely bring to their personal, social, and political lives. Recent scholarly trends have tended to treat ideals of critical detachment as illusory, elitist, and dangerous, invested in unattainable perspectives and disregarding of embodied existence and the experience of differently situated, and differently enfranchised, social groups. Such assumptions fail to capture the keenly reflective and vexed relation that many thinkers, both historical and contemporary, have had toward the personal side of what have been precipitously judged to be impersonal (objective, disinterested, scientific, detached) practices. They also fail to

¹¹ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² See Lorraine Daston, “The Moral Economy of Science,” *Osiris* 10 (1995): 3–24; Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, “The Image of Objectivity,” *Representations* 40 (1992): 81–128; and Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective,” *Social Studies of Science* 22 (1992): 597–618.

recognize not only that intellectual and political forms of detachment—such as liberalism, aestheticism, cosmopolitanism, and proceduralism—emerge historically but also that they can become embedded and habitual in ways that might seem unlikely at the time of their emergence.

The approach that I adopt shares the spirit of two influential trends in contemporary theory, although it can also be usefully distinguished from them: these are, roughly speaking, the turn to ethics and the turn to affect (or feeling). As Lawrence Buell argues, the new interest in ethics has been influenced from a number of directions, including the emphasis on “care of the self” in the later work of Foucault, claims for an ethics of deconstruction in the work of Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller, and arguments for a more traditional and specifically literary ethics in writings by Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum.¹³ The distinctive work of Emmanuel Levinas, which departs from deconstruction in its insistence on the priority of ethics to epistemology, has also exerted considerable force with its assertion of the primacy of the relation to the other.¹⁴ All of these theoretical currents (and crosscurrents) are pertinent to any renewed interest in ethos in contemporary theory, and the essays here have been broadly influenced by this larger context (there is extended treatment of both Nussbaum and Foucault). But I depart from many of the assumptions and approaches that characterize this more general terrain, primarily through an emphasis on reflective reason. While some notion of cultivated practice could certainly be said to inform the ethics advanced by all these writers, I favor an approach that lays stress on the capacity of reflective reason, through which the subject acknowledges and advances valued practices (whose value accrues from both the goals being pursued and the means by which habitual orientations toward such goals can be fostered). The assumptions here are at once Kantian, in their insistence on critical capacity and self-authorization, and Aristotelian, in their interest in self-cultivation and character. Such assumptions are not entirely at odds with the work of the later Foucault, and they are compatible with the reading-based ideals of Nussbaum and Booth. But

¹³ Lawrence Buell, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics,” in Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–13. See also Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994); Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001); J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ For a helpful discussion of ethics in Derrida and Levinas, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

the strong interest I have in the “character” of various theories—the ways in which the practices they advocate get imagined in distinctly characterological terms—lends my approach a certain distinctiveness. Moreover, there is outright divergence from the approach to ethics in Levinas, with its stress on the ethical subject as receptive patient rather than self-cultivating agent, and in Derrida, who invokes a similarly displaced subject and dwells overwhelmingly on the shared condition of semiotic undecidability or openness. The deconstructionist emphasis on acknowledging the radical conditions of undecidability surrounding any decision resides at some distance from the agent-centered ideas of character and self-cultivation I am developing here.

Recent attention to affect might also be seen as related to the approach that I adopt here, especially insofar as work focused on the category of affect has often claimed significance precisely for its attention to lived experience and for its attempt to add experiential or existential depth to theoretical approaches. There are a wide range of writings in literary, cultural, and political theory that either demand that affect should be integrated into what is typically defined against it—reason, thought, analysis—or claim that affect can bring theory or politics alive. In *The Radical Aesthetic*, for example, Isobel Armstrong argues for a developed analytic of emotion as a key feature of a renewed understanding of the aesthetic and its political possibilities: the underlying assumption is that modern thought has had a particularly impoverished understanding of emotion. Armstrong explicitly associates emotion with the category of life.¹⁵ Similarly, recent work by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown that specific affects might be said to typically characterize or accompany specific forms of theory.¹⁶ The work in this area is highly varied, but it does tend to share an assumption that affect has the potential to enrich, correct, or even displace theory. By connecting theoretical postures to living practices, social relations, and psychological experience, this work is provocative in the same way that I hope an emphasis on characterology and ethos will be found provocative.

However, just as Aristotle thought it necessary to distinguish logos, pathos, and ethos from one another, I, too, will argue for the analytical distinctiveness and value of ethos as over and against pathos (affect). More importantly, I will suggest that contemporary theory would do well to use ethos to disrupt the conceptual dynamic frequently set into play by opposing pathos to logos. One central problem in elevating affect as the most significant answer or counterforce to theory’s perceived

¹⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

¹⁶ See especially Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction is About You,” in Sedgwick, ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.

abstractness is that it allows one to skirt the question of critical reflection. Since affect is typically presented in somatic and noncognitive terms, it often serves as a safe solution within a critical climate that has become suspicious not only of the perceived impersonality of abstractness, but also of the forms of rationality that many of the abstract theories themselves denounce. While the spectrum of work on affect is rich and closely allied to the topos of ethos that I will pursue here, it is also symptomatic of a larger inability to conceptualize the characterological imagination of theory itself and to address how practitioners might reflectively realize, promote, and ultimately even render habitual those postures that best encompass its intellectual and ethicopolitical values.

One particularly symptomatic example of the turn toward affect as an answer to the perceived abstraction and bluntness of theory can be found in Charles Altieri's *Postmodernisms Now*.¹⁷ In his book, Altieri distinguishes between “what is living and what is dead” in postmodernism. As theory, Altieri contends, postmodernism is largely and deservedly dead. But in its imaginative aesthetic incarnations—in other words, as art—postmodernism is living. In Altieri's view, it is only through the aesthetic—conceived as particularistic, existential, and nongeneralizable—that postmodernism can exorcise the demon of theoretical fetishism. And interestingly, Altieri consistently singles out affect as the vivifying force, and primary indexical sign, of aesthetic life.

Altieri usefully identifies a number of constraints in the postmodern theoretical imagination, and he is particularly impatient with the reductive hermeneutic imposed by overattention to identity politics. But it is also the case that he aims to create a sharp demarcation whereby theoretical abstraction simply fails to capture the more authentic enactments of artistic expression. Such a demarcation denies to theory the possibilities that he locates in the arts, whose aim is “not to offer theoretical solutions but to envision imaginative stances for living within and finessing and even building upon what we cannot resolve” (15). *The Way We Argue Now* insists that such stances already inhabit theory—with greater and lesser degrees of explicitness—and that arguments like Altieri's distort and stereotype theory, thereby foreclosing an appreciation of the extent to which theory itself grapples with the issue of living enactment. And to the extent that theory values the reflective life, its own understandings of individual and collective practice are more comprehensively recognized if we can show how they project not only affective dimensions, but also ethical ones.

¹⁷ Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998). Page-number references will be made parenthetically in the text.

In any event, to point this out is not to erase the distinction between art and theory but rather to acknowledge what might be called, in an extension of the characterological interest, the novelistic imagination of particular theories. If, as I argue in one of the essays here, ethics always precedes epistemology insofar as the question “how should I live” precedes the determinations of any epistemological project, then theory cannot coherently cut itself off from life in the first place. There are certainly more and less abstract, more and less vividly practical, theoretical systems—and there are many, many different forms of theory, not all of which imagine their own ethos in ways that I find productive, tenable, or interesting. But what this book consistently refuses is the tendency to dismiss the resources of theory through reference to negative terms such as “abstractness,” “thinness,” or “aridity.”

The situation that I aim to describe is complicated by the fact that ethos itself has emerged as a somewhat localized term of art over the past couple of decades, one that is often specifically set against critical reason. Indeed, as I argue in chapter 6, the influential late stage of the Habermas-Foucault debate in both Britain and America, a debate that made itself particularly felt in the fields of literary and political theory, was structured by an assumption that Foucauldian ethos was fundamentally opposed to the investment in argument that animated Habermas’s democratic proceduralism as well as his discourse ethics. More generally, to the extent that “ethos” has appeared as a valorized term in contemporary theory, it designates a somewhat mystified ideal of enactment that defines itself against the explicitness and perceived normalizing force of reason. To take simply one example from the realm of poststructuralist political theory, I will cite from Chantal Mouffe’s insistence on the limitations of the Habermasian approach and her offering up of a notion of “democratic ethos” as a more viable and attractive alternative.

It is necessary to realize that it is not by offering sophisticated rational arguments nor by making context-transcendent truth claims about the superiority of liberal democracy that democratic values can be fostered. The creation of democratic forms of individuality is a question of *identification* with democratic values and this is a complex process that takes place through a diversity of practices, discourses, and language games. . . . Liberal democratic principles can only be defended in a contextualist manner, as being constitutive of our form of life, and we should not try to ground our commitment to them on something supposedly safer. To secure allegiance and adhesion to those principles what is needed is the creation of a democratic *ethos*. It has to do with the mobilization of passions and sentiments, the multiplication of practices, institutions, and

language games that provide the condition of possibility for democratic subjects and democratic forms of willing.¹⁸

This series of statements forwards the idea that political principles and values can only be defended and promoted if they are conceived as part of the texture of ongoing ways of life. “Sophisticated rational arguments” about the superiority or philosophical basis of such principles and values necessarily fail to orient themselves toward politics as a way of life: by their very form, they fundamentally misconstrue the nature of political life and disable the democratic project. To underscore the deficiencies of rational argument, Mouffe gives pride of place to the mobilization of affect (“passions and sentiments”) in the advancement of political aims. By sharpened contrast, rational argument and context-transcending claims are themselves definitively barred from contextualist meaningfulness and effectivity.

It is this set of assumptions, with their framing opposition between rationality and ethos, that these essays collectively challenge. A conceptual dynamic that opposes rationality to ethos, and that in turn conflates ethos and affect, projects the idea that various discursive practices of rationality—such as critique, argument, or procedure—are unable to realize themselves as a viable and positive ethos. Moreover, by simply assigning ethos a kind of unchallenged privilege—something in need of cultivation, but hazy enough in definition to seem not to carry with it any sense of coercion or power—the possibility for a more precise and comprehensive study of the ways that ethos informs all manner of theory and argument goes missing.

. . .

The book divides into three sections, which are linked not only to conceptual unities, but also, by and large, to the chronology of composition. The first pair of essays examines the topos of detachment and reflective distance in contemporary theory, isolating the underdeveloped normative dimensions of those forms of poststructuralist theory that have influenced work in literary studies, cultural studies, and political theory. The aim in both of these pieces, which concentrate on formations within feminist and queer theory, is to explore and assess vying conceptions of critical detachment.

The first chapter, “Debatable Performances,” addresses a prominent debate in feminist and queer theory in the nineties, one which coalesced in an encounter between Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib. Like Mouffe, Butler exemplifies a widely shared poststructuralist tendency to accuse

¹⁸ Chantal Mouffe, “Introduction,” in Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Richard Rorty, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Routledge, 1996), 5.

Habermasian critical theory (here represented by Benhabib) of the delusion that philosophy can solve the messy, embedded problems of ongoing political life. Interestingly, then, a certain form of philosophical detachment—here associated with rational reflection, proceduralist forms of debate, and universalist principle—is positioned as hopelessly cut off from anything that could authentically count as politics.

In this essay I first analyze the contours of the debate and then suggest a way beyond the impasse presented by it. My argument is that both critical and queer theory are interested in postures of cultivated detachment: critical theory in its promotion of postconventional stances and queer theory in its promotion of persistent denaturalization of imposed identities. Given this common interest in a posture of critique, both sides are unnecessarily defended against each other. On the one hand, Benhabib has an overly narrow conception of what debate or political expression might mean, one that could be usefully expanded through an inclusion of the ironic and theatrical modes of queer politics. On the other hand, Butler produces a fundamental incoherence in her refusal to acknowledge the norms—continuous with those of critical theory—that underwrite her own project. In the end, I suggest that critical theory has the more compelling and comprehensive account of the relation between critical practice, intersubjective ethics, and institutional politics, but I also endorse a pluralist attitude toward the forms through which critical detachment might manifest itself or develop into ongoing, lived practices.

A discernible tension runs throughout this particular essay, and indeed throughout the book as a whole. On the one hand, I am concerned to make a case for Habermasian discourse ethics and democratic proceduralism, which means making the case for a conception of critical rationality underwritten by communicative action. I think not only that this is the most coherent conception of critique on the horizon but also that it is widely misunderstood and often falsely opposed to other theoretical practices. To some extent, theoretical disagreements such as that between Butler and Benhabib stem from divergent views on the basic conditions of linguistic and social life. Poststructuralists insist, in opposition to Habermas, that language is fundamentally unstable, reason fundamentally instrumental, and communicative relations riven by forms of power and violence. I approach these philosophical and political differences by adducing what I claim to be the superior explanatory power of the neo-Kantian position. To that defense I join a critique of poststructuralism, emphasizing its failure to acknowledge or justify its own reliance on critical distance and disputing its portrayal of rationality and procedure. When poststructuralist critics contend that Habermas's ideas of rationality and procedure do not recognize practices as always em-

bedded, embodied, and power-laden, they fail to comprehend that Habermas presents rational, communicative, and procedural norms as guiding or regulative ideals, in both a descriptive and a prescriptive sense. As descriptive concepts, they heuristically allow for the isolation of dimensions of practice that may never exist in any pure form, and as evaluative norms, they do not deny but rather assume the existence of forces and conditions that mitigate against their full realization.

On the other hand, and in some tension with my defense of Habermas, I welcome a plurality of conceptions of detachment and theoretical characterology: in the first essay, I therefore encourage a capacious understanding of forms of critical detachment, one that can comprehend practices that range from reflective endorsement to persistent denaturalization. Thus there is a kind of asymmetry in the project: a strong tendency to favor Habermasian critical theory, and a countervailing claim that critical theory should expand to embrace a wider range of political practices, expressions, modes, and moods. My view is that this is a productive tension, one that informs any attempt to conceptualize a liberal temperament. Inevitably, the postures that liberal pluralism imagines for itself will need to be supplemented by, if not include, an openness to postures and practices different from its own. There thus emerges a felt difference between the principles and orienting postures that one endorses, and those other practices and modes that one takes pains to describe, understand, and sympathetically entertain (as a liberal pluralist). In any event, the tension will be evident throughout the project.

In the second essay, “The Temptations of Aggrandized Agency,” I situate the discussion of cultivated postures of critique within an analysis of feminist accounts of gender and modernity. An offshoot of the historical and critical arguments of *The Powers of Distance*, this essay compares theories of gendered modernity across the disciplines of literary criticism and history, with particular focus on differently strained conceptions of ordinary subjectivity and critical detachment in both these theoretical formations. I argue that the intersection of feminist traditions of hagiography with poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity produces a literary-critical theoretical landscape in which the question of a lived theoretical stance is only fantasmatically present. The essay therefore comprehends both a critique of the failure to represent historical practices of detachment in their complexity and a critique of certain versions of contemporary theory that do not adequately own their own assumptions about the possibilities for critical distance.

The following two chapters shift toward a more specific consideration of ethos and character. The first essay, “Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity,” seeks to come to terms with the implications of the turn to cosmopolitanism as a key new concept in

cultural and political theory. This essay grew out of an interest in exploring the impulses behind new appeals to cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and universalism, on the other. Those works that deliberately choose to revive and espouse the term “cosmopolitanism” often share a persistent interest in enactment: cosmopolitanism for many scholars becomes a way to imagine a living universalism, one that is guided above all by tact, sensibility, and practical judgment. Cosmopolitanism is, in short, an ethos of universalism. By insisting that an embodied universalism will fundamentally alter, and refine, any universalism conceived in more impersonal or objective terms, it illustrates the very turn to enactment and ethos that this study seeks to anatomize and assess.

The next essay, “Realism, Universalism, and the Science of the Human,” examines the relative force exerted by the ethical and epistemological poles of certain influential critiques of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The central aim of the essay is to examine what consequences ensue when normative or ethical dimensions of critique are subordinated to epistemological considerations. Taking the contrasting examples of Satya P. Mohanty’s predominantly epistemological critique of postmodernism (in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*) and Martha C. Nussbaum’s predominantly normative or ethical approach (in *Cultivating Humanity*), I suggest that practices of knowledge are always framed by questions of how one should live.¹⁹ Nussbaum’s attention to character and self-cultivation is a reflection of this structuring assumption, while Mohanty’s avowed “postpositivism,” by virtue of its investment in the objectivizing postures of philosophical realism, remains shadowed by that which it aims to overcome.

The final three essays take as their central concern the status of ethos and character in contemporary intellectual debate, particularly in reference to pragmatism, the later Foucault, and proceduralism (with special emphasis on Habermas). “Pragmatism and Character” grew out of the observation that characterological terms were at once persistently present, and yet fundamentally unexamined, in debates over pragmatism. On the one hand, pragmatists are accused of being, among other things, smug, complacent, cynical, blithe, and dismissive. On the other hand, pragmatists themselves claim forms of exemplary character, most prominently through a self-congratulatory relation to their own casual relation to contingency. The contours of the pragmatist case reveal not simply the foreclosure of explicit consideration of character in dominant forms

¹⁹ Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

of theory within literary and cultural criticism, but also the insistent way in which the characterological dimension continues nonetheless to make itself felt, to seem to *matter*, even when it only appears surreptitiously, or with the appearance of descriptive superfluity (as in the case of the attributions of smugness or complacency).

Ultimately, I read the case of pragmatism critically and symptomatically, arguing that the characterological dimension of recent pragmatist work is curiously narrow, best described as a personification of the fundamental theoretical claim that there is a seamless relation between truth and belief. But an apprehension of contingency need not translate into a governing attitude; indeed, an open-ended approach to character as a project in the making is ultimately more compatible with the historical tradition of pragmatism as promoted by William James and John Dewey. I argue for a pluralist approach to the existential dimensions of contingent vocabularies, such as we find at least partly elaborated by Richard Rorty, whom I assign a productively anomalous place in my account.²⁰ But more centrally, I also use the pragmatist example to provide an illustration of how an attention to characterology might be incorporated into theoretical analysis, rather than being merely dismissed as a version of *ad hominem* argument.

The penultimate essay, “Argument and Ethos,” continues the diagnosis begun in the essay on pragmatism by turning its attention to the role that the category of ethos plays in the later stages of the scholarly framing, in both literary and political theory, of a fundamental opposition between Foucault and Habermas. The aim here is to show that to the extent that “ethos” emerges as a valued term in this debate, it has been defined principally in opposition to reason. In the case of the reception of Foucault, this mystified understanding of ethos joins with a form of charismatic fallacy that forecloses a more productive elaboration of ethos as a dimension of practice more generally conceived. The second half of this essay attempts to displace the opposition of reason and ethos by exploring the several ways in which a conception of ethos informs Habermas’s own critique of Foucault, as well as some of Habermas’s central theoretical claims and practices.

²⁰ There is a parallel between the pluralist position I advocate here and Pierre Hadot’s pluralist treatment of the existential postures of ancient philosophy. Hadot sees each of the various schools of ancient philosophy—Stoicism, Epicureanism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cynicism, and Pyrrhonism—as manifesting a possibility of the human spirit, one that the complexity of life invites us to treat experimentally and pluralistically. Hadot refuses both the dogma of the individual schools and the attempt to yoke existential modes or moods to specific doctrines in any absolute way. His approach is more generally suggestive for the claims I am trying to advance on the important ways in which notions of character and ethos can enrich our understanding of theoretical practices. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

The final chapter presses this reading of Habermas further, suggesting how we might view the ostensibly abstract and impersonal practice of postconventional critique and proceduralist democracy as an ethos in its own right. This chapter revisits Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* so as to provide a larger context for understanding the divergent trajectories of poststructuralist and proceduralist political theory. I claim that poststructuralism is in crucial respects the inheritor of the authenticity concept that Trilling saw as coming to dominate over sincerity in the modern period. Proceduralism, by contrast, as a provocative reframing of the sincerity concept, makes it possible to imagine the ways in which cultivated practices of reflection and argument can themselves be articulated as an ethos, at both the individual and collective levels. In its elaboration of an ethicopolitical ideal for posttraditional pluralist societies, Habermasian proceduralism promotes an ethos of ongoing distance-taking from one's most intimate and meaningful cultural identifications. Its presumed impersonality is less a radical denial of the embedded nature of all practices than an expression of the commitment to an ongoing project of reflective distance—or, as Habermas puts it, to the progressive expansion of horizons.

What this final chapter attempts, then, is a displacement of the tendency to oppose reason and ethos, precisely by claiming an ethos of reason and argument. In doing so, I am also pressing for a culture of argument skeptical of the trumping claims made on behalf of the more limiting, antirational conception of ethos—variously conceived as charismatic critique, pre-given identity, or accommodating tact in the face of claims to the primacy of culturally specific systems of belief. This is the most provocative claim of the book: that the dominant paradigms within literary and cultural studies have had an adverse effect on the fostering of public-sphere argument precisely insofar as identity has come to seem the strongest argument of all.

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With the exception of the final essay, all of the essays in this book have appeared previously. Since these essays reflect the time of their composition in important ways, I have chosen not to introduce any substantial revisions, though I have of course corrected errata, regularized style, and changed cross-references so that they refer not to the originally published essays, but rather to the appropriate chapter of this text. The original publication information is contained in the acknowledgments.