

Finding a middle ground between agonism and deliberation: Integrity-preserving compromise and moral-democratic competence

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Abstract

Complex world problems, such as climate change, require global solutions that are socially and politically legitimate. This poses challenges in a multicultural world for both the theory and practice of democracy. Neither alternative to democracy as a mere voting system – agonistics and deliberation – are immune from criticism regarding the issue of intra- and intersubjective agreement in the context of persisting dilemmas. For example, deliberative democratic theories are often criticized for the emphasis they place on achieving consensus, whereas agonistic democratic approaches invite the danger of relativism. In this paper we investigate the possibility of finding a middle ground between common deliberative and agonistic approaches to democratic theory that would better translate into the practice of conflict resolution. The purpose of the paper is to provide a theoretical framework for universal procedural standards for dilemma resolution in a pluralistic world that can be founded on a moral-democratic, competence based approach. Moral-democratic competence is here understood in terms of the ability to make judgments and act in accordance with held moral ideals and values in both intra- and intersubjective dimensions.

After providing conceptual clarifications regarding agonistic and deliberative democracy, we discuss how the dual-aspect theory can facilitate the crafting of a renewed pluralist democratic theory. Such a theory requires a philosophy of conflict for ethical and political decision making. To this end, we build on philosopher Martin Benjamin's claim that compromise need not always amount to moral capitulation but can advance, and in fact often is necessary for, the preservation of integrity. Key to our argument is, first, the distinction and interrelation between political and moral compromise (e.g., moral commitments can include democratic ideals and an awareness of irreducible difference). Second, seeing oneself as a part of a larger community in which decisions must be made—as opposed to a tempting, but overly idealistic image of one's own perfection against a degraded society—is essential to a full appreciation and effective use of compromise, as part of the exercise of moral-democratic competence. Our approach carries importance for democratic practice as it is capable of accommodating compromise when consensus is impossible. In this context, KMDD can play an important educational component in multifaceted challenges of strengthening moral-democratic competence.