ABSTRACT

Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy

Nicholas J. Norman-Krause, Ph.D.

Mentor: Jonathan Tran, Ph.D.

This dissertation is a theological consideration of conflict in pluralist democratic politics. Centering on the relationship between political community and difference, it develops an "agonistic political theology" of radical democracy grounded in the claim that conflict is inherent to the goodness of creation and constitutive of flourishing creaturely sociality. It argues that, rightly understood as emerging from the conditions of creatureliness, democratic conflict can be appreciated for its creative and generative political possibilities—namely, the formation of a vibrant, pluralist, and participatory common life.

An introductory first chapter frames the dissertation's key claims with respect to recent scholarship in political theory and political theology on the relationship between religion, democracy, and pluralism. The following chapter considers two important schools of contemporary political theology—postliberal Augustinianism and Augustinian civic liberalism—as representative of two approaches to conceptualizing political community and difference in theological terms. Both frame democratic pluralism and difference by way of analogy, appealing to the harmonious unity-in-difference of the

divine Trinity, but in so doing they obscure the place of conflict in finite creaturely life. Chapter three thus turns to recent work in agonistic political theory to show conflict's enduring place in democratic politics and the virtues of an account of democracy centered on facilitating contestational and conflictual engagements amidst disagreement and difference. In chapter four, I deepen these insights drawn from agonistic theory by sketching a "political-theological anthropology" wherein conflict belongs to the natural goodness of finite, embodied creatures who must negotiate their differences in a world of contingency. Chapter five then returns to the question of political community in light of these conditions and limits of creaturely sociality. Drawing on ordinary language philosophy, democratic theory, and grassroots democratic organizing, I propose a form of "agonistic community" centered on practices of conflict negotiation in coming to shared judgment and action. Finally, I conclude the dissertation with a theological meditation on the conflicts of democracy as an occasion for the conversion of love.

Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy

by

Nicholas J. Norman-Krause, B.A., M.Div.

A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Religion

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W.H. Bellinger, Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

_____

Jonathan Tran, Ph.D., Chairperson

_____

Natalie Carnes, Ph.D.

_____

Robert C. Miner, Ph.D.

_____

D. Stephen Long, Ph.D.

_____

Paul Martens, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

August 2021

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Page bearing signatures is kept on file in the Graduate School.

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Existence is robbed of its weight, its gravity, when it is deprived of its agon.

—Gillian Rose

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1. Democracy in Conflict

On January 6, 2021, a violent mob stormed the United States Capitol building. It aimed to disrupt a joint-congressional session formalizing Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and demand the overturning of those election results. Following on the heels of a "Save America" rally where thousands had gathered to hear the recently defeated President Donald Trump announce, "We will never concede" the loss of that election, and call on his supporters to "demonstrate strength," "fight like hell," and march to the Capitol building,[1] men and women in Kevlar vests and military garb, draped in flags, pushed through metal barricades and Capitol police, breaking into the Capitol Rotunda, House and Senate chambers, and congressional offices. Rioters fought with security and police, broke windows and doors, trashed the premises, and vandalized and looted the building for several hours. Five people died during the events; 140 more were injured.[2] As the nation looked on, many were shocked at the eruption of post-election violence. Others were less than surprised, arguing that this was the near-inevitable

[1] Justin Vallejo, "Trump 'Save America Rally' speech transcript from 6 January: The words that got the president impeached," *The Independent*, January 13, 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/trump-speech-6-january-transcript-impeachment-b1786924.html.

[2] Tom Jackman, "Police union says 140 officers injured in Capitol riot," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/police-union-says-140-officers-injured-in-capitol-riot/2021/01/27/60743642-60e2-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297_story.html.

outcome of four years of lies, disinformation, conspiracy, and demagoguery, a representation of the civil division and antagonism saturating American political life.[3]

Two weeks after the insurrection, in his inaugural address on the steps of the same Capitol rioters had besieged, President Joe Biden sought to address the conflicts riving the nation. His call was for oneness in the face of democracy's fragility, instability, and polarizations. "So now," he declared, "on this hallowed ground where just days ago violence sought to shake this Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible."[4] American democracy was facing a precarious moment, he acknowledged. "To overcome these challenges—to restore the soul and to secure the future of America—requires more than words. It requires that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity. Unity." Recurring throughout the speech some eight times, "unity" was proposed as a healing balm for national wounds inflicted by pandemic, economic crisis, and partisan strife. Biden even sought to imbue this appeal to unity with a theological valence. "Many centuries ago," he said, "Saint Augustine, a saint of my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love." So American unity, Biden declared, must be grounded in those "common objects we love that define us as Americans," loves of "Opportunity. Security. Liberty. Dignity. Respect. Honor. And, yes, the truth."[5] Michael Lamb, an Augustinian political theorist, applauded Biden's "Augustinian call for concord," especially his provocation to consider

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[3] David A. Graham, "Trump's Coup Attempt Didn't Start on January 6," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/jeffrey-clark-justice-department-trump-coup/617818/.

[4] President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Inaugural Address," *The White House*, January 21, 2021, https://www.whitehouse. gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/. All further quotes are taken from this transcript.

[5] I return to this Augustinian insight in the dissertation's concluding chapter.

what kinds of "objects of love will bring us into harmony" as a nation, securing "unity amid plurality."[6] Indeed, "concord" or "harmony" is the key political term for Augustine, Lamb suggested, and we would do well to ponder its significance for pluralist democratic politics today. Politics, Lamb argued, "should not seek a totalizing uniformity that dominates those who are different, but a humble harmony that gives justice to all, welcomes others into community, and forges unity in plurality."[7] Fostering a peaceful and harmonious unity amidst difference, Lamb suggested, is the key challenge for politics today, as it was in Augustine's time.

Biden's appeal to Augustinian love amidst the backdrop of social conflict and Lamb's further allusions to harmony, community, and unity-in-plurality echo a central theme of Christian political theology and political theory more generally: the relationship between *community* and *difference*. How should political communities, and, in particular, pluralist democratic ones, think about the complex patterns of unity and diversity, agreement and disagreement, sharing and separateness that comprise political society? How should they respond to conflicts amidst difference within the political community? Do the events of January 6, which surfaced deep divisions brewing in the American citizenry for years, pose a challenge to democracy's capacity to deal with difference, even threaten a liberal consensus regarding the possibilities of democratic pluralism? These are critical questions for political theorists and theologians considering the meaning of religion in pluralist democratic politics. But Biden's address also raises important questions for democratic citizens, especially persons of faith: Should harmony

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[6] Michael Lamb, "Biden's Augustinian Call for Concord," *Breaking Ground*, January 27, 2021, https://breaking ground.us/bidens-augustinian-call-for-concord/.

[7] Lamb, "Biden's Augustinian Call for Concord."

or concord be a goal of politics? Will our pursuit of "common objects of love" result in social unity? Should we desire the reconciliation of conflict in political life?

Since the beginning of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the subject of political polarization has become a staple fixation of the political commentariat. "Polarization is killing our country," concluded one analyst after summarizing numerous studies and surveys conducted in the years following 2016. "Hyper-partisanship is poisoning our politics, making our democracy seem increasingly dysfunctional. A fixation on our differences is fracturing us into warring tribes…This is not the American way. It is the opposite of the secret of our success, summed up by our national motto, *e pluribus unum*—'out of many, one'."[8] The Pew Research Center has consistently charted the intensification of partisan political identity in recent years and its resulting hostility toward perceived political opponents.[9] In one sense, recent journalistic obsession with political polarization and related issues of adversarial political rhetoric, "fake news" disinformation, die-hard party loyalty, and social fragmentation has been a response to genuinely new developments in American democracy. Increasing moral and religious diversity, the rise of a massive cable news industry, and the dominance of social media networks all pose genuinely novel challenges for a democracy whose institutions and norms were developed by framers who could have never anticipated them or their effects. In another sense, however, preoccupation with political polarization is hardly new. American political commentators, leaders, and theorists have almost always, but

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[8] John Avlon, "Polarization is poisoning America. Here's an antidote," *CNN*, November 1, 2019, https://www.cnn. com/2019/10/30/opinions/fractured-states-of-america-polarization-is-killing-us-avlon/index.html.

[9] See, for instance, *Pew Research Center*, "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," December 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/.

especially in the twentieth century, been concerned with the so-called "problem of pluralism."[10] How much difference can a society endure and still function as a democratic polity? How should conflicts amidst those differences be negotiated?

Indeed, conflict amidst difference figures as a kind of specter haunting liberal political theory. In the introduction to his monumentally important book *Political Liberalism*, for instance, John Rawls recalls memories of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century "wars of religion" as paradigmatic of the tragic conflicts from which political liberalism offers deliverance.[11] The wars, according to Rawls, represent a latent instability just beneath the surface of liberal societies, always threatening to reemerge, a "mortal conflict" between comprehensive doctrines with "transcendent elements not admitting of compromise."[12] "Political liberalism," he argues, "starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict."[13] For Rawls, then, the aim of liberal theory and politics is the achievement of a "stable, well-ordered, and peaceful society," the conditions of which are the "preemption, containment, or resolution of conflict."[14] Liberalism affirms the goodness of pluralism and difference, that is, but fears

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[10] Most famously, James Madison wrote of "factions" and republican governance in Federalist 10. See James Madison, "No. 10," in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. George Carey and James McClellan (Indianopolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 42–49.

[11] For a comprehensive account of the way memory of the so-called "wars of religion" shaped the emergence and development of the liberal state, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[12] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xxviii, quoted in Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 8. Coles insightfully demonstrates the profound extent to which Rawls' liberalism is determined by an anxiety about conflict.

[13] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxviii, quoted in Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 8.

[14] Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 242.

the conflicts they may occasion. Like Biden and Lamb, Rawls sees conflict amidst difference as democracy's great threat, that which liberal governance must stave off, preclude, and forestall in order for democratic pluralism to flourish. Political liberalism is thus framed as the antithesis to democratic conflict.

Much of the discussion in contemporary democratic theory around pluralism evinces this same aversion to conflict. Consider two of its most prominent strands: Rawlsian liberalism and Habermasian deliberative democracy.[15] In the former, democratic theory begins with the "fact of pluralism"—that is, liberal democratic society is characterized by "a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines."[16] That these doctrines are both *reasonable* (that is, internally coherent and consistent with deeply held moral, religious, or metaphysical commitments) and *incompatible* (unable to be reconciled by appeal to some shared moral, religious, or metaphysical basis) provokes a dilemma for democratic pluralism regarding legitimacy. How can political constitutions, judgments, policies, laws, etc. be justified in the face of incommensurable difference? The task of liberal theory, for followers of Rawls, is to develop a "political" theory of justice, as opposed to one grounded in a metaphysically-based comprehensive doctrine, capable of legitimacy and an account of "public reason"

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[15] The key texts of the former being Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; and the more recent articulations of some of Rawls' chief arguments by Gerald Gaus. See Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal: Justice in a Diverse Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Gerald Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The key texts of the latter approach are Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); and Seyla Benhabib. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[16] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii.

to set the parameters within which democratic debate can be had amidst difference.[17] The latter defines "what kinds of reasons" citizens "may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake," given their deep disagreements.[18] In other words, public reason marks the rational and discursive space within which citizens can convert privately held reasons into a liberal currency all participants can recognize as rational. By barring comprehensive doctrines from the realm of democratic reason-giving, Rawlsians believe they are able to preclude conflicts amidst difference in the sphere of political reasoning and achieve consensus.

Jürgen Habermas and contemporary advocates of "deliberative democracy," such as Seyla Benhabib, advocate a different version of public reason for approaching questions of pluralism and difference. Rather than elucidate the contours of a form *reason* (secular, liberal, etc.), they attend to institutions, practices, and norms of *reasoning* wherein citizens deliberate across differences. By theorizing ideal discursive conditions of intersubjective reasoning and argumentation, Habermas proposes, one can discern principles for organizing deliberative procedures in a way that will generate full consensus among members. Put differently, one can deduce pragmatic or "procedural" rules from the presuppositions of argumentation and communication and thus establish normative principles for democratic deliberation.[19] The key point here regarding conflict and difference, then, is that consensus is something achieved in democratic practice

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[17] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xv, distinguishes between "a moral doctrine of justice general in scope" and "a strictly political conception of justice," grounded in a shared "overlapping consensus" between comprehensive doctrines.

[18] John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): 766.

[19] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 86–94; Seyla Benhabib, "The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics," *New German Critique* 35 (1985): 83–96.

rather than something democracy presupposes. Yet the goal of deliberative democracy is the same as Rawlsian liberalism's: to overcome conflict and disagreement in order to achieve democratic legitimacy.

In recent decades, however, a body of political theory has emerged which challenges these dominant approaches to pluralism and difference in democratic theory, arguing that the evasion of conflict is a serious error that undermines the vitality of democratic life. Theorists and advocates of "agonistic pluralism" and "radical democracy," like Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, Sheldon Wolin, and William Connolly, argue for the centrality of conflict amidst difference in democratic politics, celebrating contestation and adversarial struggle aimed at expanding the boundaries of the political and evermore pluralizing its constitution. As Mouffe puts it, "In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism."[20] Seeing in certain forms of conflict (though not all) a productive and generative capacity to achieve greater democratization and inclusion, agonists argue that consensus-based theories of democracy, like those of Rawls and Habermas, foreclose pluralism's radical possibilities in their aim to transcend, resolve, or preempt conflict. Agonistic theory, then, seeks to re-center struggle, or *agon*, as a critical democratic activity and thus reconceptualize political society in terms of nonviolent, adversarial contestation rather than social harmony. Democracy is, in other words, a practice of conflict.

[20] Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy, Power, and the Political," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 255.

2. The Argument: Agonistic Political Theology

Christianity has a complicated relationship to difference. One need only to recall its long and troubled histories of antisemitism, Islamophobia, punishment of heretics, colonialism, and racialization, among others to see a proclivity to respond to difference with violence, scapegoating, suspicion, and coercion. Even as the upholding of difference in the divine economy has been a critical concern of the Christian theological tradition (the difference of God and creation, of persons in the Godhead, of natures in Christ), otherness has received considerably less charitable treatment in Christendom's creaturely economies, being effaced (Judaism's supersession), reified and subjugated (the colonization, racialization, and gendering of subjects), or exterminated (heretics and infidels in inquisitions, holy wars, etc.). In light of this history, many contemporary persons of faith have sought out strategies of affirmation of difference (abandoning missionary and proselytization projects, taking up interreligious dialogues and worship, etc.), emphasizing respect and toleration as key virtues. Yet both orientations toward difference—those of hostility and those of affirmation—share, somewhat paradoxically, a common trait: a deep anxiety about, and difficulty making sense of, the *confrontations* difference makes. In other words, Christianity, both historically and presently, evinces a deep uneasiness about conflict.

Consider, for instance, a number of popular Christian responses to growing pluralization, conflict, and disagreement in American politics in recent years. Various strategies of withdrawal from the political in the pursuit of ecclesial, local, or sectarian projects have been proposed as "options" for Christians, citing Benedict, Francis, and any

number of historic saints as guides.[21] Reframing the counter-witness of "resident alien" Christianity inside of an almost apocalyptic culture-war mentality, these responses see pluralism as compromising democratic societies, its endemic conflicts as confirmation of its decline. We can typologize this first response to difference in terms of *retreat*. Second, a growing tendency within the Christian Right aspires to seize, convert, and save the American state from its fragmentation by offering visions of a postliberal reconstructed Christendom. Among Protestants, such fantasies are rooted in fundamentalist traditions of "Christian reconstructionism"; in Roman Catholicism, this has manifested in a renewed interest in "integralism."[22] Each seeks an overcoming of democratic pluralism's conflicts by imposition of an integrated and comprehensive moral-religious-political system. Call this the *conquer* response to difference and its conflicts. Finally, perhaps the most prevalent attitude toward democratic conflict and difference is one of *avoidance*. From popular evangelical calls to approach voting in "biblical" rather than partisan terms[23] to Catholic centrist pleas for common sense measures to transcend party politics,[24] Christian leaders, writers, and thinkers continually insist that faith possesses the power to unite persons across difference, resolving conflicts by appealing to supposedly shared religious identities. In this view, democratic conflict is a sign of worldliness, of over-investment in

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[21] The most popular version of this being Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Random House, 2018).

[22] See, for instance, Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2020). For a more popular example, see *The Josias* project, https://thejosias.com.

[23] See, for instance, David Platt, *Before You Vote: Seven Questions Every Christian Should Ask* (Washington, D.C.: Radical, Inc., 2020).

[24] E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); E. J. Dionne, Jr., Norman J. Ornstein, and Thomas E. Mann, *One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet Deported* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).

partisan loyalty and political ideology. Faith, instead, calls persons to transcend political difference in Christian charity. Yet in positioning religion above the conflicts of democratic life these approaches end up obscuring the fundamental tensions operative in political society, allowing them to foment below the surface.

The aim of this dissertation is to advance a theological approach to democratic pluralism centered on direct attention to conflict. Rather than retreat from, conquer, or avoid conflict, my proposal is one of *engagement*, exposing, addressing, and facilitating negotiation of the conflicts and disagreements present in democratic life. In a moment when countless voices, religious and otherwise, are advocating strategies of reduction and mitigation of conflict in contemporary politics, I am insisting, perhaps surprisingly, we need *more* and *better* conflict. I do so confident in the generative and productive capacities of conflict negotiation for vibrant democratic life and community. The chapters that follow thus attempt an intervention in Christian thinking about democratic conflict and difference similar to the kind agonistic theory makes in contemporary democratic theory. That is, against the tendency to see conflict amidst difference as a danger or threat to be managed, resolved, preempted, or transcended, I defend an essentially conflictual account of democratic politics, identifying what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "the goods of conflict" therein.[25] I do so by proposing an "agonistic political theology" of radical democracy centered on the conviction that conflict is a constitutive feature of flourishing political community, considered from both a political and theological standpoint.

My argument shares much in common, then, with recent work in peace and conflict studies that proposes models and practices of "transformative conflict." Rather

[25] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," in *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life*, ed. Susan Mendus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 133–155.

that viewing conflict as a departure—a kind of "fall"—from stable, peaceful social existence, and so a problem to be solved, transformative conflict perspectives see "violence, rather than conflict, as the converse of peace."[26] Conflict, the struggle between and amidst the various perspectives, values, hopes, commitments, and ambitions of a people, is as natural as difference—indeed, is natural precisely because of the ways difference is constitutive of human persons at the most basic level. Moreover, as Jason Springs importantly notes, "violence is not simply the intensification of conflict."[27] Conflict certainly *can* take the form of violence, but it need not. Conflict is not *inherently* violent. It can, in fact, be a healthy feature of a just, equitable, and peaceful social life, a sign that a political community possesses a vibrant and participatory citizenry intent on forging a common life amidst its differences.

This brings me to the second major claim of this dissertation—namely, that conflict and difference are constitutive of political *community*. It is one thing to ascribe to conflict a fundamental status in social and political order. It is another—and, I believe, more ambitious—kind of claim to locate conflict amidst difference as an inherent feature of political community. To be sure, the term "community" is as contested a notion in political theory and theology as it is in moral philosophy, ethnography, and social theory. Many, especially those who consider the achievement of democratic pluralism to be a genuine good of modern life, eschew notions of political community as reactionary, nostalgic, totalitarian, and opposed to difference. Political community, it is argued, presumes a uniform set of shared values, narratives, identities, and beliefs neither

[26] Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 244.

[27] Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 244, quoting Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 182–183.

available to nor desirable for persons living in a globalized, integrated, and pluralist world. To aspire to substantial forms of political community, it is worried, risks marginalizing and subjugating difference. The account of "agonistic community" developed in this dissertation acknowledges these anxieties while refusing to cede the idea of political community to its reactionary defenders. It construes political community as a dynamic and fluid collectivity, constituted by difference and its conflictual, agonistic negotiations, able to share judgment and action.[28]

These two principal claims—that conflict is an inherent feature of flourishing political life and that conflict and difference are internal to political community—are substantiated by and grounded in a distinctly theological argument running throughout this dissertation. I contend that conflict belongs to the *goodness* of creaturely life rather than its distortion, corruption, or disordering under the conditions of sin. Conflict, I argue, arises from the human creature's constitution as a finite, contingent, and embodied being who acts with and among a diversity of other creatures in a common world of shared goods. Conflicts—incompatibilities of action, disagreements over the use of shared goods, tensions over the organization of common life, negotiations of finite space, etc.—inevitably occur when creatures seek to pursue their diverse interests and desires in a world of contingency and realize their selfhood and creaturely perfection under the conditions of finitude. Some will regard this claim concerning conflict's fundamental

[28] For the most part, I speak of political community in this dissertation in a formal sense, without specifying its exact scope or political/ civic manifestations. This is intentional, as I take the question of political community's scale to be an open one. Can a modern nation-state, for instance, ever be considered a political community? A municipality? A neighborhood? In the final chapter I consider broad-based community organizations as forms of agonistic political community, but for the most part I remain agnostic about how such collectivities can "scale-up." Instead, following Keri Day, I imagine agonistic political communities mostly as collectivities of resistance rather than majority social formations. See Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

place in the order of creation with great skepticism, and I will need to develop, explain, and defend it carefully. Nevertheless, I maintain, it is a claim as ordinary as it is provocative. That conflict, at least in some of its forms (a point I will say more about shortly), belongs to the natural goodness of creatures is revealed in our ordinary experience of deep friendships, intimate partnerships, sustained marriages, devoted family, and even, perhaps especially, the life of church. Who has not experienced a relationship deepened, trust nourished, knowledge of the other and oneself illuminated, or significant personal and moral growth enabled by the experience of interpersonal conflict and its successful negotiation? In light of these experiences, who would wish friendships, families, marriages, or communities to be deprived of or exempted from the conflicts which make them dynamic, passionate, and meaningful relationships? Conflict is not a negation of creaturely relation but a sign of its vitality. The failure of speculative theory and theology to acknowledge this feature of ordinary creaturely life is perhaps only profoundly human. But its avoidance can have profoundly devastating consequences, legitimating political formations far more ambitious than finite creatures can bear or far less substantial than finite creatures deserve and need. What is required, I argue, is an account of political community correlated to the capacities, limits, and needs of creatures. My aim in this dissertation is to propose such an account, attending to conflict as a central component of creaturely life.

3. Democracy and Difference in Contemporary Political Theology

The arguments of this dissertation seek to make a contribution to a growing body of literature that has emerged in recent years concerning the relationship between religion, democracy, and pluralism. This scholarship can be broken down into roughly

three basic types: *political theoretical* considerations of moral and religious pluralism, *political theological* considerations of democracy and issues of sovereignty, and *theological* considerations of the challenges of democratic pluralism and the possibilities of Christian witness and participation in democratic politics. I take up each of these at different points in the dissertation, focusing chiefly on the third, occasionally on the second, and indirectly on the first.

The body of scholarly literature concerning moral and religious pluralism from the perspective of political theory or political philosophy is extensive. As noted above, the "problem of pluralism" has been an enduring matter of concern in twentieth and twenty-first century political thought, especially in the United States. Along with Rawls' *Political Liberalism*, some key works include William Galston's *Liberal Purposes*, Stephen Macedo's *Liberal Virtues* and *Diversity and Distrust*, Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief*, Richard Rorty's "Religion as a Conversation Stopper," Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Religion in the Public Sphere*, Kent Greenawalt's *Private Consciences and Public Reasons*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's *Democracy and Disagreement*, and the essays collected in Seyla Benhabib's *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* and Paul Weithman's *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*.[29] More recently, Robert Audi's 2000 book *Religious*

[29] William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1990); Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Richard Rorty, "Religion as a Conversation Stopper," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 168–174; Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); *Democracy and Difference: Contesting*

Commitment and Secular Reason, Jeffrey Stout's 2004 *Democracy and Tradition*, Nicholas Wolterstorff's 2012 *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, Brian Leiter's 2013 *Why Tolerate Religion*, and Cécil Laborde's 2017 *Liberalism's Religion* have contributed to the rapidly growing "religion and public life" discourse.[30] Whether affirmative or critical of Rawls' first efforts to systematically address the place of religion, religious language, and religious reasoning in democratic discourse, these works generally presume his framing of the problem of religious pluralism for liberal democratic polities. Theorists associated with the debates in religion and public life discourse for the most part view the task of political theory to be one of delineating how politics can be conducted amidst moral and religious diversity by resolving, preempting, or adjudicating conflicts amidst difference when they arise.

Recently, however, this dominant liberal approach to democratic pluralism has been challenged by radical theorists of agonistic democracy. For agonists, liberal political theory's attempts to resolve democracy's conflicts, whether by means of public reason, deliberative proceduralism, etc., have both perpetuated the exclusion of marginal voices and reasons that fail to meet the criteria of "reasonableness" and deprived democratic politics of its essential agonistic vitality.[31] Agonists propose a vision of politics centered

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the Boundaries of the Political, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); *Religion and Cotemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul Weithman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

[30] Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Terence Cuneo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Cécil Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[31] Key works include Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2014); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2009);

not on the resolution of democratic conflict and the adjudication of difference but on the facilitation of non-violent practices of contestation, confrontation, and conflictual engagement between constituents of pluralist democracy. This account of the agonistic political is grounded in an ontology which sees conflict and contestation as fundamental features of being's excessive and dynamic vitality. Agonistic theorists, then, exhibit an appreciation for conflict's generative and creative political possibilities, and so has much in common with my theological affirmations of conflict's goodness. In this dissertation, I draw heavily on agonistic theory in order to show how it helps reconfigure thinking about religion and religious pluralism in democratic politics.

The second major conversation to which this dissertation seeks to make a contribution is political theological reflection on radical democratic politics. I say more about the specific contours of "political theology" as a discipline below. Broadly, political theology is a critical enterprise which seeks to understand the ways theological concepts shape, legitimate, and symbolically interpret political realities. Since the publication of Carl Schmitt's 1922 essay *Politische Theologie*, a central theme of political theology has been the notion of sovereignty—how theological beliefs around divine transcendence, power, and authority authorize forms of political rule. For theorists like Schmitt, Ernst Kantorowicz, Giorgio Agamben, and others, modern political orders, and the nation-state in particular, are best conceptualized in terms of their deployments of

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William E. Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); and Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

and justificatory practices around sovereign power.[32] In wake of political theology's numerous critiques of sovereign power, a number of political theologians have attempted to theorize practices and movements of radical democracy in post-sovereign or diffusive sovereign terms.[33] Radical forms of participatory democracy, in other words, herald the possibilities of a political life not governed by sovereign rule but by the dispersed power of the multitude. My account of agonistic democracy draws on these discussions in political theology about the prospects of radical democratic movements, but it also argues they, and political theology as a whole, are too determined by and narrowly concerned with the notion of sovereignty. Political theologies of sovereignty have difficulty theorizing democracy because they conceptualize it first and foremost in terms of divine power and powerlessness, transcendence and immanence, divine will and human agency. As a result, they deify the democratic multitude and see in the *demos* the work and will of God in history.[34] My political theology of radical democracy attempts instead a much more ordinary account of politics—the work of finite creatures in negotiating their common life around material goods. By reconceptualizing democracy not in terms of

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[32] Key works in this regard are Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Pres, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[33] For instance, Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

[34] See, for instance, Robbins, who writes that the "God of sovereign power is dead, and democracy is its political instantiation" (*Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 165). As the political instantiation of the death of God, the democratic multitude assumes a messianic role as the "inaugurated but not yet fulfilled, realizable but not yet fully realized" form of salvation (178).

sovereignty and its divine analogues, but instead in terms of theological anthropology and the doctrine of creation, political theology is better able to attend to the specific ways political life is conditioned by creatureliness. This dissertation aims, then, to establish the relevance and rich potential of theological reflection on creation for political theology and radical politics.

Finally, the primary conversation around religion, democracy, and pluralism this dissertation seeks to address is a more straightforwardly theological one. Perhaps first taken up in a sustained way by Reinhold Niebuhr in his 1944 *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*[35] and Jacques Maritain in his 1943 *Christianisme et démocratie*,[36] theological reflection on democracy has, in recent decades, come to focus much attention on the question of pluralism and difference. How should Christians think about and participate in pluralist democratic politics with all its conflicts, these theologians ask? Works like Ronald Thiemann's *Religion in Public Life*, Luke Bretherton's *Hospitality as Holiness*, John Bowlin's *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, Timothy Jackson's *Political Agape*, Kristen Deede Johnson's *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, and Joseph Rivera's *Political Theology and Pluralism*, among others, have sought to address some of the conceptual dilemmas of Christian participation in democratic pluralism from a theological perspective.[37] Others like Matthew Eggemeier's

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[35] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[36] Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy and The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011).

[37] Ronald E. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996); Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2016); John R. Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Timothy P. Jackson, *Political Agape: Prophetic Christianity and Liberal Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015); Kristen Deede Johnson,

Against Empire, Ryan Andrew Newson's *Radical Friendship*, Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* and *Resurrecting Democracy*, and Stanley Hauerwas' and Romand Coles' *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* have considered radical democratic and pluralist politics as a means of Christian political witness and mission.[38] For these theologians, grassroots democracy provides an occasion for Christian engagement in political life, cooperating with diverse others to establish and cultivate a flourishing common life amidst difference. This dissertation likewise looks to radical democratic politics as a mode of faithful political action which affirms, rather than dominates, difference. But it does so, I hope to show, in a more realist vein. One of the essential characteristics of radical democracy, as mentioned above, is conflict, a matter about which Christian theologians often have little to say. As a whole, theological writing on radical democratic politics has tended to avoid sustained attention to and reflection on conflict, contestation, and adversarial relations amidst difference. This is unfortunate since Christians involved in grassroots democracy and radical democratic politics continually confront and must negotiate conflict in their work. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson notes in her theological reflection on grassroots democratic organizing, theology is in deep need of careful and sophisticated thinking about the nature and

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Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joseph Rivera, *Political Theology and Pluralism: Renewing Public Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

[38] Matthew T. Eggemeier, *Against Empire: Ekklesial Resistance and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020); Ryan Andrew Newson, *Radical Friendship: The Politics of Communal Discernment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017); Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

meaning of democratic conflict.[39] This dissertation seeks to contribute to theological reflection on radical democratic and pluralist politics a theology of democratic conflict, one that locates conflict within the order of creaturely goodness and as a feature of flourishing human community.

While its primary aim is to address discussions of the relationship between religion, democracy, and pluralism, this dissertation also touches on a number of other related conversations in contemporary Christian theology more broadly. The first is a theological re-appraisal of tragedy.[40] Figures like Donald MacKinnon, Rowan Williams, and others have written of the importance of recognizing the tragic in a Christian vision of the world, arguing that acknowledgment of tragedy is not opposed to belief in creation's goodness, divine origin, or redemptive destiny but simply an entailment of creaturely finitude.[41] Paul Blowers, in fact, has recently argued that Christian reflection on the tragic—those elements of our "inexorable ontological condition bound up with human finitude, mutability, instability, passibility, and mortality"—dates back to the early centuries of Christianity.[42] Contrary to the claims of George Steiner and others,

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[39] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Receiving from the Other: Theology and Grass-Roots Organizing," *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012): 433–434.

[40] This is paralleled by a similar trend to recover tragedy and the tragic for political theory. See, for instance, Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Romand Coles, "Tragedy's Tragedy: Political Liberalism and its Others," in *Beyond Gated Politics*, 1–41; Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and J. Donald Moon, *Constructing Community: Moral Pluralism and Tragic Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[41] Donald M. MacKinnon, "Tragedy and Ethics," in *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 182–195; Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. See also the essays in *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, ed. Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[42] Paul M. Blowers, *Visions and Faces of the Tragic: The Mimesis of Tragedy and the Folly of Salvation in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

Blowers shows, Christianity, "with its message of redemption from suffering and transcending the world," is not, in essence, "anti-tragic," but has recognized from its beginnings a "tragic dimension to human life."[43] To recognize elements of the tragic in God's world, suggests Williams, is "different from saying that human life is doomed to 'the tragic'," somehow incapable of redemption or reconciliation.[44] Rather, it is to acknowledge the legitimate place of loss, change, contingency, fragility, and finitude in the goodness of creaturely life. The very conditions that enable human creatures to love, grow, feel, choose, change, etc., in other words, necessarily entail the possibility of conflict and loss. This dissertation offers a contribution to theological reflection on the tragic insofar as it seeks to name and explicate the place of conflict in creaturely life, showing it to be an entailment of human finitude, contingency, and embodiment, a social reality of flourishing human community amidst difference.

Second, and relatedly, this dissertation makes an intervention in contemporary discussions of the nature of difference and its place in a theological metaphysics of creation. Rooted in early and medieval Christian metaphysical writing on unity and distinction, the One and the many, harmony, aesthetics, and the divine Trinity, recent explorations in "Trinitarian ontology" and "Trinitarian metaphysics of creation" have sought to rearticulate classical theological perspectives on difference in order to address the challenges of post-structuralist and postmodern critiques of classical and Christian metaphysics. John Zizioulas, David Bentley Hart, Klaus Hemmerle, and others see the unity-in-distinction of the divine Trinity to be a paradigm for thinking about the

[43] Blowers, *Visions and Faces of the Tragic*, 1, 3.

[44] Williams, *Tragic Imagination*, 2.

metaphysical relationship of unity and difference generally.[45] Moreover, as John Milbank has shown, speculative metaphysical thinking about difference is intimately tied to ethical and political questions around pluralism, peace and violence, and community.[46] Milbank influentially proposed a Christian "ontology of peace," grounded in Trinitarian thought, to counter the various "ontologies of violence" presupposed in modern, secular, neoliberal orders.[47] The Trinity, he argued, manifests a form of unity and difference in which each is internal to the other, the difference of the Trinitarian persons united in perfect, harmonic charity. Milbank is not alone in seeing the Trinity to ground an ontology of relation useful for Christian ethical reflection on difference. Miroslav Volf, Catherine LaCugna, David Cunningham, and many others have likewise attempted practical, social-ethical, and ecclesiological applications of doctrines of the Trinity to human social life.[48] This dissertation challenges certain analogical approaches to divine

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[45] See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004); David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2017); Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards A Trinitarian Ontology* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020). Chelle Stearns has recently proposed a Trinitarian conceptualization of unity and difference using the musical aesthetics of Arnold Schoenberg and the Trinitarian theology of Colin Gunton. See Chelle L. Stearns, *Handling Dissonance: A Musical Theological Aesthetic of Unity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019).

[46] For a recent example of reflection on the metaphysical basis of an ethics of nonviolence, see Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *The Architectonics of Hope: Violence, Apocalyptic, and the Transformation of Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017); as well as the important questions raised by Paul Martens concerning the place of agonism in a metaphysics of peace (Paul Martens, "Metaphysics, Desire, and the Challenges of Embodies Apocalyptic," *Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 3 [2018]: 289–295.).

[47] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). See also the essays in *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*, ed. Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), many of which take up this theme of the ethical implications of Trinitarian ontology.

[48] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998); Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity Is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 403–423; Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991);

and creaturely difference, arguing political theology must attend to the important disanalogies and discontinuities between Trinitarian and creaturely sociality. I am indebted to the trenchant critiques of ethical applications of Trinitarian theology made by feminist and philosophical theologians like Linn Tonstad, Kathryn Tanner, and Karen Kilby.[49] Following their concerns about what Tonstad calls the "corrective projectionism" of such projects,[50] I develop a political theology of difference indexed to creatures' experience of difference under the conditions of finitude, proposing an account of pluralist politics attentive to the limits of creaturehood.

Third, this dissertation concerns the political legacy of Augustine's theology. While I take up Augustine only in chapter two, considering two major contemporary political theological appropriations of his thought, and in the conclusion, the question of the viability of Augustinianism for thinking about contemporary pluralist politics looms large in the dissertation. I offer no final judgment on the matter, but I do raise the question of whether Augustine's theological vision can sufficiently incorporate recognition of the goodness of conflict into its understanding of Christian political involvement in the earthly city. Augustine's theology, especially his attention to love as a fundamental dimension of human social and political life, is immensely useful for thinking about the practice of democratic politics, as I show in the concluding chapter.

David S. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

[49] Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Kathryn Tanner, "The Trinity," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 363–375; Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000): 432–445.

[50] Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 13.

Yet it is unclear whether Augustine's thought can authorize the truly radical and transformative politics needed for our contemporary moment. This dissertation, then, raises a number of critical questions about, as well as suggests some creative possibilities for, reading Augustine in a neoliberal and pluralist democratic age.

Finally, the arguments developed in the pages that follow pose questions about the place and significance of theological anthropology and the doctrine of creation in political theology. Insofar as the concept of sovereignty has been the main preoccupation of political theology since its conception, thinking about politics has most often been done with reference to the doctrine of God and related theological concepts like providence, Christology, and salvation. Political theologians with an interest in making constructive use of theological notions for radical political ends tend to do so, then, by developing revisionist doctrines of God, the God-world relation, and so on in order to ground a post-sovereign politics.[51] For both critical and constructive political theologians, then, politics is about conceptions of divinity—to use Carl Raschke's term, the "force of God."[52]

With good reason, political theology has been anxious about the doctrine of creation. Natural law, orders of creation, classical theological anthropology, and other aspects of theological reflection on creation have often been put in service to reactionary,

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[51] See, for instance, John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Michael S. Hogue, *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Crocket, *Radical Political Theology*.

[52] Carl A. Raschke, *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

hierarchical, and oppressive political formations and hegemonies.[53] Creation is not frequently appealed to in radical political thought, nor is it thought to have serious democratic potential. To be sure, theologians and ethicists have, at different times, turned to creation as a source of ethical normativity and reached quite radical conclusions. One thinks of nineteenth-century Chartists, twentieth-century civil rights leaders and black radicals, and contemporary ecotheologians as instances in which a theological vision of nature has funded a radical and transformative political vision.[54] My account of the generative and creative possibilities of democratic conflict attempts to similarly draw out the radical political entailments of creation, theorizing agonistic democracy as a "creaturely politics" attentive to the natural capacities of human persons.

4. Key Terms

A brief word is in order regarding two important terms in this dissertation, both of which figure in its title: "conflict" and "political theology." By addressing them here, I hope to clarify the nature of my thesis regarding the place of conflict in creation and flourishing democratic community.

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[53] Willie Jennings, for instance, has consistently argued the doctrine of creation is central to understanding the history of colonial Christianity, and that "reframing the world" through renewed attention to creation stands at the heart of resistance to it. See Willie James Jennings, "Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Doctrine of Creation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (2019): 388–407.

[54] Though, it should be noted, as Lisa Sideris has shown with respect to contemporary ecotheology and environmental ethics, appeals to nature for ethical normativity can often be highly selective in the empirical and scientific data they consult, resulting in romantic and unrealistic accounts of the natural world. See Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

4.1 Conflict

I noted above the uneasiness both liberal political theory and Christian theology have with conflict. For liberals like John Rawls, conflict is a prelude to violence and the obverse of social stability and peace. For Christian theologians, conflict is usually rendered in terms of sin—the distortion of charitable and harmonic human relations, the product of moral error or wrongdoing, evidence of injustice or violence. Conflict, in other words, belongs not to the order of creation but to its fallenness, its disordering and corruption by sin. Peace, not conflict, it is argued, is ontologically basic. My contention in this dissertation is that such a "metaphysics of peace" idealizes and romanticizes the structure of creation and misconstrues the nature of finite creaturely life. While I do not ascribe to violence, injustice, or sin any sort of ontological primacy, I show that conflict is distinct from these and does in fact belong to the fundamental integrity of creation's goodness. Conflict *can* be occasioned by moral error, be characteristic of a situation of injustice, or rise to the level of violence, but it is not in its essence, I argue, correlated to these nor does it necessarily entail them. Conflict can simply arise from the ordinary life of finite creatures who pursue various and multiple goods, desires, and courses of action in a shared world of contingency.

I speak of conflict in what follows in two senses. First, conflict refers to a circumstance in which two or more goods, desires, or courses of action cannot simultaneously be pursued without one or both of those goods, desires, or courses of action undergoing some transformation or change. I wish to cultivate a garden in a space shared between our houses. You wish to build a small playground. Neither of these goods, our desires for them, or our modes of achieving them may necessarily be

misguided, sinful, or wrong. But in the common world we inhabit we find ourselves in conflict and in need of some kind of negotiation. You might decide to join me in gardening, resolving to take your kids to the neighborhood park's playground instead. Or I might decide to join the local community garden rather than planting my own. Perhaps we discover a way to integrate our desired goods in some kind of garden-playground compromise. However we proceed, the negotiation of our conflicting goods, desires, and courses of action will result in change, transformation, and revision. For finite, embodied creatures living in a shared world of contingency, negotiations of conflicts like these are entirely ordinary, the substance of common life, and a simple reality of living in a world of multiplicity and difference.

This is not a lamentable feature of our creaturely life, even if it may sometimes entail experiences of loss, frustration, friction, struggle, disagreement, tension, or opposition. This leads me to the second sense in which I use the term conflict in this dissertation: conflict is a social reality, an interpersonal dynamic, that arises between persons who find their goods, desires, and courses of action to be incompatible. I most often refer to this sense of conflict in terms of "agonism" or "agonistics." Agonistic relations and conflictual interactions need not be sinful, unjust, or violent. They may manifest in resentment, harm, hostility, or uncharitable behavior, but they need not necessarily do so. Agonism is simply a feature of creaturely sociality amidst difference. Recall Jason Springs' insight, drawn from peace and conflict studies and transformative conflict practices, that conflict of this sort is simply "intrinsic to human relationships, social processes, and institutions."[55] Put simply, Springs writes, "where there is

[55] Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 255.

relationship, there will be conflict."[56] The question is not how to prevent conflict but how to shape its engagement and negotiation, how to order it to the ends of just and flourishing community, and how to cultivate practices and capacities for using conflict to transform our common life. This is the task, I will argue, of agonistic politics.

My claim, then, is not that conflict has no relation to sin, injustice, and violence, only that this relation is not a necessary one. Conflict can easily become sinful, unjust, or violent—this is what happens when conflict is divorced from charity. But, as Martin Luther King, Jr. so importantly saw, love and conflict are not opposed.[57] Indeed, I suggest, conflict *must* be shaped by love if it is to be productive and generative of flourishing democratic community. In such a charitable agonistics, conflict is ordered by love to the facilitation and cultivation of a common life amidst difference.

Part of my argument in this dissertation is that conflict in democratic politics is often conceived as arising from sin, moral error, injustice or misapprehension of the good. One claim, person, proposal, or action is "right" in absolute moral terms; another is wrong. Democratic conflict is, then, perceived as a kind of Manichaean struggle between fundamentally competing moral visions and ultimate values, a zero-sum game of winners and losers. I suggest however, that more often than not, democratic conflicts are of a different kind. The conflicts of democracy are best understood as conflicts in practical reasoning about goods and how best to organize and pursue them. In this sense,

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[56] Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 255.

[57] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 247.

democracy is the name we give to the set of practices human creatures use to negotiate their conflicts in a common life.

4.2. Political Theology

This dissertation is an exercise in political theology, a discipline whose boundaries and aims are highly disputed and contested. On the one hand, as indicated above, political theology is a critical discipline which interrogates, as Adam Kotsko puts it, "the homologies between theological and political systems."[58] Political theology in this technical sense uses the tools of religious studies, history, cultural theory, philosophy, and critical theory to trace genealogies of religious and political concepts, practices, institutions, and symbols. This critical genealogical project takes its cue from Carl Schmitt's famous assertion that

> All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.[59]

Schmitt took the concept of sovereignty to be political theology's chief concern, and this has profoundly shaped the trajectory of political theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially among its most influential voices—Kantorowicz, Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek. Political theologies focused on sovereignty interrogate, Kotsko says, "systems of legitimacy," the ways in which "political, social, economic, and religious

[58] Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 9.

[59] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

orders maintain their explanatory power and justify the loyalty of their adherents."[60] While political theology has most often focused its quest on the first half of Schmitt's formulation, delineating the historical transference of theological concepts to the political, Kotsko has suggested a more expansive view of political theology centered on what Schmitt identifies in the latter half of the formulation as a "sociology of the concept." More than simply critical genealogy of theology's justification and legitimation of political order, which can sometimes tend toward reductionism, this approach seeks to understand theological and political thought as located in a complex web of mutually informing beliefs and attitudes. Political theology in this sense, Kotsko shows, takes religious and political beliefs to "express the deep convictions of a particular community at a particular time and place about how the world is and ought to be."[61] Study of the "sociology of the concept" seeks a "nonreductionist analysis of the homologies between political and theological or metaphysical systems" and the ways religious and political thought are always intertwined.[62]

This more expansive view of political theology is more open, in my view, to constructive work. As Kotsko puts it, political theology in this sense

> seeks not to document the past, but to make it available as a tool to think with. It does not aim merely to interpret the present moment, but to defamiliarize it by exposing its contingency. In other words, political-theological genealogies are creative attempts to reorder our relationship with the past and present in order to reveal fresh possibilities for the future.[63]

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[60] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 8.

[61] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 30.

[62] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 31.

[63] Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 9.

While Kotsko himself has little interest in pursuing political theology as a normative discourse, I take the above recognition to allow the possibility of connecting this first sense of political theology as a critical discourse to a second kind of political theology, namely, the constructive work of theological reflection on the political, what is sometimes called "theological politics."[64] This form of "theological political theology"[65] seeks, in addition to critical reflection on the political, to propose normative accounts of faithful political engagement, political organization, and social life. Political theology in this sense is a species of theology generally and conceptualizes political life and action within the categories of traditional Christian belief.[66] What distinguishes political theology from other forms of theological reflection and political theorizing, as William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott put it, is its "explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in time and space."[67] Theology, in other words, desires to speak normatively about the political.

This dissertation approaches political theology in both of the above senses. On the one hand, it engages in critical analysis of the ways theological understandings of God, creation, humanity, etc. shape political thinking about democracy, pluralism, and conflict. My approach thus resembles Kotsko's more capacious understanding of political

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[64] See, for instance, William T. Cavanaugh, "The Mystical and the Real: Putting Theology Back into Political Theology," in *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 99–120; Stanley Hauerwas, "How to (Not) Be a Political Theologian," in *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmands Publishing Co., 2015), 170–190.

[65] William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 3.

[66] Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, "Preface," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xi–xii.

[67] Cavanaugh and Scott, "Introduction to the Second Edition," 4.

theology as a mode of critical inquiry concerning the mutual imbrication of theology and political thought. On the other hand, I aspire to far more than simply documenting this set of relations. I propose a constructive political theology of democratic conflict with normative implications and ethical dimensions.

5. Summary of the Argument

My aim in the chapters that follow is to defend two central theses: first, that conflict is an inherent feature of flourishing political life because it is intrinsic to the goodness of creation; second, that conflict and difference are constitutive of political community. In doing so, I develop an agonistic political theology of radical democracy. My argument unfolds in four key parts. First, in chapter two, "Augustinianisms and Liberalisms: Political Theology and the Problem of Difference," I offer a detailed analysis of two important schools of contemporary political theology, both of which claim the legacy of Augustine: postliberal Augustinianism and Augustinian civic liberalism. These political theologies, I suggest, represent two basic trajectories in contemporary political theology regarding democracy, community, and difference—one which privileges community, the other difference. In my critical appraisal of their insights and shortcomings, I identify two central problematics that my dissertation will attempt to address: first, the need to conceptualize political community and difference in non-oppositional terms; second, the need to attend to conflict as integral to flourishing democratic community. Chapter three, "Radical Democracy and Agonistic Theology," considers these two problematics from the perspective of political theory, drawing on agonistic theory to yield an account of democratic politics which appreciates conflict, contestation, and adversarial struggle as vital to pluralist politics. The insights of

agonists, I show, illuminate conflict's generative and creative possibilities. In this chapter, I also raise the question of political community, questioning agonism's reluctance to embrace substantial forms of collectivity and gesturing toward a vision of "agonistic community" in which conflict is a central practice of a pluralist common life amidst difference. Finally, I conclude this chapter by considering several recent theological engagements with agonistic theory, their achievements and limitations. The radical political theologians I consider rightly see in agonistic theory resources for thinking theologically about democratic conflict, multiplicity, and difference. However, they, like the Augustinians considered in chapter two, remain captive to an analogical picture of divine and human sociality. Whereas the Augustinians commend the unity-in-distinction of the divine Trinity as a template for approaching pluralist politics, radical political theologians move in the opposite direction, proposing revisionist and heterodox doctrines of God as immanent to the contingencies of democratic multiplicity. Both, I argue, fail to apprehend the political in distinctly *creaturely* terms.

Chapter four, "Agonistic Creatures: A Political-Theological Anthropology," is the most theologically constructive of the dissertation's chapters. It aims to move political theological thinking about pluralism and difference beyond an analogical frame and towards a consideration of difference as a specifically creaturely reality. Creaturely difference, I show, is lived in the modalities of finitude, contingency, and embodiment. Because of this, creaturely difference, unlike the Trinity's manifestation of difference in perichoretic communion, entails conflict. Agonism is, I argue, a fundamental feature of the goodness of human creatures who share a common life amidst difference. I term this portrait of agonistic creatures a "political-theological anthropology" and suggest political

theology approach democracy in terms of anthropology rather than sovereignty and divinity. Chapter five, "Agonistic Community: Conflict and Common Judgment," returns to the question of political community, this time in view of conflict's place in the goodness of creation. I continue here my emphasis on framing politics in terms of creaturely finitude, turning to the political thought of Johannes Althusius and Yves Simon as examples of what I call a "creaturely politics." Althusius and Simon, I show, reveal political community to consist not in uniform agreement, shared identity, or harmonic consensus but in the ability to share common judgment and action. I take up judgment as the chapter's key theme, sketching an account of "agonistic community" in which common judgment is the substantive heart of democratic community. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the grassroots democratic organizing of the Industrial Areas Foundation, an example of agonistic community and the use of conflict in coming to shared judgment. Finally, in the dissertation's short concluding chapter, I return to Augustine, drawing on his perceptive observation that politics is, at bottom, a matter of sharing, contesting, converting, and ordering loves. I offer a theological interpretation of agonism in terms of Augustinian *caritas*, contending that agonistic democracy can be seen as an occasion for the conversion of love, both of self and others. When viewed in terms of love and conversion, the conflicts of democracy can be received as a means of grace, God's agonistic gift to draw creatures into divine communion.

CHAPTER TWO

Augustinianisms and Liberalisms: Political Theology and the Problem of Difference

1. Introduction

A central problematic for contemporary Christian political theology has been the relationship of political community and difference. In practical terms, this is often conceptualized as the theological problem of political pluralism. How should Christians relate to a political society characterized by deep difference, ideological conflicts, and moral disagreement? How should Christians interact with their non-Christian fellow citizens? How can and should a political community make shared judgments regarding its common life in the face of radical disagreement concerning the ends and goals of that common life? In more theoretical terms, configuring the relationship of community and difference lies at the heart of debates around the relationship of the church to the political, the theological significance of liberalism, democracy, and socialism, and metaphysical questions concerning the social nature of human persons and their created capacities. As will become clear in what follows, how one construes the relationship between political community and difference, subordinating one to the other or reconciling them in some way, often determines the shape of one's politics and the kinds of political society one values as most conducive to human flourishing.

My aim in this chapter is primarily descriptive in nature: to delineate two predominant patterns of theological reflection on political community, difference, and conflict in contemporary political theology. My purpose in mapping these trajectories, and the chief goal of this chapter, is twofold: first, to disclose and delineate a common

tendency in contemporary political theology to conceptualize political community and difference in oppositional terms; and second, to show how doing so eventuates in a negative evaluation of democratic conflict. Only by reconstruing the relationship between political community and difference in non-oppositional terms, then, can conflict be appreciated for its positive, dynamic, and generative qualities. My descriptive work in this chapter situates the argument developed in the following chapters as a response to these limitations and contradictions in contemporary political theology. My constructive political theology of democratic conflict, then, is both appreciative of the insights of the political theologians I examine here and intent on overcoming their shortcomings.

The two approaches to political community, difference, and conflict I detail below are both indebted to Augustine for their formulations, even as they reach vastly different conclusions about what the Augustinian legacy means for contemporary politics. On the one hand, what I call "postliberal Augustinianism" approaches difference as constitutive of a harmonic sociality ordered to the common good. This is to say, flourishing human community exhibits difference ordered in charity, reflecting the unity-in-distinction of the Triune life. In practical politics, however, this means difference can flourish in a democratic society only when it is ordered by certain non-democratic measures to the common good. Postliberal Augustinianism, then, prioritizes a hierarchical political community of ordered difference so as to transcend potential conflicts amidst difference that might threaten social harmony and undermine its commitment to the common good. On the other hand, what I refer to as "Augustinian civic liberalism" approaches difference as properly constitutive of the pluralist *saeculum* that Christians are called to engage and patiently endure. These Augustinians, unlike their postliberal counterparts, see political

liberalism as conducive to such an account of difference, insofar as it eschews thick notions of political community and the common good in favor of greater pluralism. For Augustinian civic liberals, difference is not to be transcended but affirmed and encountered as sacramental, and so ultimately prioritized over political community. Put differently, political community is proposed in more modest and minimalist terms so as to avoid the swallowing up of difference in monolithic notions of political community.

Both postliberal Augustinians and Augustinian civic liberals share two important characteristics. First, they advance an account of political community and difference that trades in oppositional logics. Their Trinitarian social ontologies, which I consider below, afford them much more nuanced ways of construing the relation between the two than those of previous generations of theorists captured by liberal–communitarian debates. Nevertheless, their ways of relating Trinitarian sociality to the political ends up still prioritizing one or the other. I argue this is because of a second key feature postliberal and civic liberal Augustinianisms share: an analogical framing of divine and human sociality that obscures the important place of conflict in creaturely life. Each perceives conflicts amidst difference in fundamentally negative terms, indexed to sin rather than the goodness of creation, and threating to either political community (for postliberals) or difference (for civic liberals). I take up each Augustinian political theology below, showing their virtues, contradictions, and limits, and then conclude by raising the question of the viability of Augustine for thinking about political community, difference, and conflict.[1]

[1] No doubt other thinkers, traditions, and movements in contemporary political theology could be considered here. My reason for choosing these two is, first, that Augustine has exercised a profound influence on modern Christian political thought, especially in America. By considering two self-consciously Augustinian political theologies, I intend to show how certain Augustinian metaphysical

2. Postliberal Augustinianism: Political Community and Difference in the Divine Economy

In the late-20th century, Protestant theology in the English-speaking world saw the rise of an immensely important movement often called "postliberalism." Associated in the United States with the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas, postliberal theology sought to recover the particularity and narrative character of Christian belief and practice and the social and public nature of the Church. In the United Kingdom, postliberal thought was pursued in a slightly different direction by thinkers often identified or self-identified with the program of Radical Orthodoxy: Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, and, most importantly, John Milbank. Both American postliberals and UK Radical Orthodox thinkers produced a body of literature spanning the fields of biblical studies, philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, and dogmatics, sharing a common aspiration to embolden the voice of theology to speak to, and often against, the concerns of secular modernity. But most significantly for my purposes, postliberal theology also produced a number of political theological visions.[2] While disparate in their prescriptions and theoretical commitments, postliberal political theologies shared a common assessment of the deficiencies of political liberalism and the need for a political theory to complement its theological program.

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concerns have framed and been presupposed in contemporary discussions of democracy and pluralism. Second, I take these approaches to represent two general tendencies in political theological thinking about community and difference: one broadly communitarian, the other broadly liberal. Insofar as many contemporary political theologians can be mapped on this axis, the postliberal vs. civic liberal argument stands as an illustrative example of these trajectories in contemporary political theology.

[2] For an account of both American postliberal thought and English Radical Orthodoxy, as distinct yet related political theologies, see Daniel M. Bell Jr., "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, eds. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 110–132.

One way of viewing the rise of postliberal political theology is as an attempt to resolve certain tensions and contradictions in the relationship between political community and difference, particularly as these realities concern the possibility of virtue. In these concerns, postliberals draw upon and extend the thesis of Alasdair MacIntyre's 1981 book *After Virtue*. According to MacIntyre, liberal society and theory lack the moral coherence necessary for virtue. Liberal pluralism's conflicts and disagreements over the nature of the good life, the ends of politics, and the means of moral deliberation, he argues, undermine the forms of agreement and shared culture necessary to sustain virtue. "[W]hat liberalism promotes," he asserts, "is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life."[3] MacIntyre goes on to delineate these types of communal relationships necessary for virtue as "traditions"—forms of life founded on shared agreements about the human good which can incorporate meaningful debate about political life, and possessive of social practices necessary for cultivating virtue. In short, for MacIntyre and his postliberal theological heirs, virtue demands communities of agreement and commonness. Liberal societies, they argue, lack this coherence, commonness, and agreement about ultimate goods that are necessary for a politics of virtue and so must be countered with postliberal alternatives. In the case of MacIntyre and American postliberals like Hauerwas, this means turning to communities of virtue *apart* from liberal democratic political communities.[4] For Milbank and other Radically

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xv.

[4] Or, perhaps better put, for Hauerwas, the church *is* the primary political community of virtue. For a detailed treatment of MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and others who make this "turn to community," see David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Orthodox inclined Anglicans, the overcoming of liberalism entails a much grander vision—a new Christendom, a postliberal socialism, and a neomedieval reimaging of political community. Both American postliberals and Radical Orthodox thinkers share, however, a definite anxiety about pluralism and the possible conflicts that arise in societies characterized by profound difference, as well as an attitude toward political community predicated on the resolution of difference and conflict for its flourishing. Postliberal political theology, then, can be characterized as a politics of virtue, wherein virtue depends on thick communities of tradition that share fundamental agreements and judgements about moral and political life. Because of this, a certain fear lingers that unchecked difference will undermine the conditions of virtue and conflict will threaten the coherence necessary to sustain communal moral life.

With this background in mind, I turn now to detail and assess this postliberal approach to political community and difference by considering what I take to be its strongest, most philosophically articulate, and most comprehensive version, put forward by John Milbank. Milbank, in my view, is an exemplary postliberal political theologian not only because he is often considered a founder of Radical Orthodoxy, but also because he offers the most consistent and detailed application of postliberal theological commitments to political theory. I treat Milbank in detail here because he directly takes up questions of political community and difference with remarkable philosophical depth. I approach Milbank's political theology in two parts, each corresponding to an important strand of his work. The first I characterize as the *speculative* task of political ontology, the second as the *practical* task of political philosophy, or a theory of politics. I examine each in turn, affirming Milbank's critique of modern social theory's "ontology of

violence" (which he also sees as the implicit ontology of neoliberalism) and his argument that liberal theory and postmodern theories of difference are insufficient to ground a transformative socialist politics. The latter requires forms of commonness, collectivity, and shared judgment. Yet, the way difference is configured, and conflict erased, in Milbank's vision, is problematic insofar as it obscures important features of human creatureliness, especially the way in which conflict arises from differences constitutive of the integrity of human creatures' goodness. I only hint at this argument regarding the goodness of conflict here, developing it in later chapters. For now, I wish simply to show how Milbank's postliberal Augustinianism obscures an important aspect of creation, one that, I argue, grounds a radically democratic and pluralist politics.

2.1. The Speculative Task: Difference, Conflict, and "Ontology of Peace"

2.1.1. Milbank's critique of differential ontologies. The central argument of Milbank's 1990 *Theology and Social Theory*, amidst its many digressions and side-arguments, regards tracing a genealogy of modern social theory by tracking its ontological commitments. The book is, like Milbank's more recent *Beyond Secular Order*, primarily a work of political *ontology*, concerned with excavating and theorizing the relation between conceptions of being and political organization, how "ideas about being coincide with ideas about human action."[5] *Theology and Social Theory*'s genealogical critique of modern social theory, then, is not simply an exercise in philosophical criticism. It is, importantly, a *political theological* critique, intended both to show the poverty of secular social theory as a theoretical basis for overcoming the

[5] John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3.

contradictions and failures of political liberalism and neoliberal capitalism, as well as to articulate the metaphysical basis for the political vision Milbank subsequently develops as a Christian socialism and politics of virtue. As I show below, Milbank's argument against secular reason and social theory is through and through a political one.

One of the chief antagonists in the story Milbank tells in *Theology and Social Theory*—perhaps, in his view, the culmination of modern social theory, as well as its most formidable contemporary option—is a conglomerate of theories he terms "ontologies of difference" or "ontologies of violence." Milbank sees these ontologies as inspired by Nietzsche and proliferating in various schools of postmodern thought and critical theory that share an interest in recovering difference, long subjugated within the totalizing discourse of Western metaphysical philosophy. Against a metaphysics of presence and identity, postmodern differential ontologies posit difference, flux, multiplicity, and becoming as metaphysically basic. Identity, stability, unity, and being are seen to be imposed on the former in modes of power, governmentality, and subjection. However, Milbank argues, these philosophical strategies simply flip the script of Western metaphysics, presuming the same binaries of identity/difference, being/becoming, unity/multiplicity, etc. they oppose. The result is, to use Deleuze's term, a "pure affirmation" of difference, irrespective of an account of relation.[6] But to make difference fundamental without an attendant account of commonness or relation, Milbank asserts, naturalizes conflict amidst difference as also necessary and essential. Lacking a means of configuring difference in terms of mutuality, differential ontologies thereby

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 188. See also, Christopher Ben Simpson, *Deleuze and Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 12–14.

ontologize force, power, struggle, and violence—all of which Milbank uses interchangeably, leading him to the simple designation "ontologies of violence."[7] These philosophical schemes propose, in other words, "a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter force."[8] Milbank channels Augustine's critique of Roman virtue and political order at exactly this juncture. Just as for Rome there "can only be virtue where there is something to be defeated," and so virtue consists in "a 'conquest' of less desirable forces," so ontologies of violence entail that peace, flourishing, and identity come by way of suppression and subjugation of difference.[9]

Nietzsche is the paradigmatic figure of this ontologizing of difference, initiating a tradition of genealogical deconstruction of Western metaphysics and its privileging of the "One" to the "Many." Nietzsche grants priority to multiplicity and contingency without resort to notions of unity, stability, and coherence. The problem, in Milbank's view, with the Nietzschean genealogical tradition as it is taken up by Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and others is that it fails to be sufficiently historicist and genealogical, confusing contingent and historical realities like violence and conflict with metaphysical principles of the world as such. As Milbank puts it, they raise "the specter of a human world

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[7] The claim that ontologizing difference commits one also to an ontologizing of violence is, of course, disputable. For one of the best interpretations of Nietzsche and Derrida in this vein, explicitly in dialogue with Milbank, see Romand Coles, "Storied Others and the Possibility of *Caritas*: Milbank and Neo-Nietzschean Ethics," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (1992): 331–351.

[8] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 4.

[9] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 393. Following Augustine's genealogy of Roman political order, Milbank writes that Roman polity must be "traced back to the arbitrary limitation of violence by violence, to victory over rivals, and the usurpation of fathers by sons" (393–394). So, we will see, with liberal polities in their myths of constraining violence through state sovereignty.

inevitably dominated by violence, without being able to make this fearful ghost more solid in historicist terms alone." Thus, "to supplement this deficiency," they "ground violence in a new transcendental philosophy, or fundamental ontology."[10] For this reason, ontologies of difference or violence resemble theological claims about the world. Neither can ultimately be demonstrated by evidential display, only shown to be true by aesthetic persuasion and narrative power. Insistence on the ontological primacy of power, struggle, and conflict is simply another *mythos*, Milbank contends, against which Christianity offers a different story, a counter genealogy. The necessary response to the nihilism of postmodernity's ontologizing of difference through essentializing struggle, conflict, and violence, Milbank asserts, is "to put forward an alternative *mythos*, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an 'ontology of peace', which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance."[11] Christian theology's alternative to ontologies of difference, in other words, is a preservation of difference, but one that relocates it within the order of charity. To ground this Milbank turns to the doctrines of Trinity and analogy.

2.1.2. Ontological peace: Trinity, difference, analogy. Against ontologies of violence, Milbank turns to the Trinity to ground a theological account of difference in charitable relation for his ontology of peace.[12] Christianity must assert peace as the fundamental structure of creation, according to Milbank, for two reasons. First, sin, as

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[10] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278.

[11] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279.

[12] On the distinctly Augustinian aspects of this ontology, see Geoffrey Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel, and Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 133–144; and D. Stephen Long, *Augustinian and Ecclesial Christian Ethics: On Loving Enemies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 72–78.

privation of original goodness, entails the disordering of original harmony, which is being itself. Second, this harmonic quality of being is ensured by the fact that, contrary to pagan creation theologies, *creatio ex nihilo* "recognizes no original violence" in creation, but instead identifies creation as sourced in the gratuity and freedom of God.[13] As Milbank puts it, Christianity "construes the infinite not as chaos, but as a harmonic peace… Peace no longer depends upon the reduction to the self-identical, but is the *sociality* of harmonious difference."[14] Importantly, Milbank's ontology of peace is not, then, simply a return to premodern metaphysical notions of transcendental unity or conceptions of the One. Rather, Milbank is out to construe an ontology wherein difference is fundamental and not reducible to some primordial unity, but also wherein difference is mediated in peaceful relation and charity rather than existing in antagonism and conflict.[15] Creaturely difference is peaceful because it is sourced in the Triune life which is "transcendental peace through differential relation."[16] Milbank's ontology of peace, then, is part and parcel of a Trinitarian metaphysics of creation which discerns a relationship of analogy between divine and creaturely sociality. Gratuity, charity, and participation fundamentally characterize the latter insofar as they are integral to the former.

The final sections of *Theology and Social Theory* are devoted to unpacking the dynamics of Trinitarian difference in order to thematize difference first in terms of the doctrine of God before moving to an account of creaturely difference. For Milbank,

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[13] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 5.

[14] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 5.

[15] "[I]t is Christianity which exposes the non-necessity of supposing, like the Nietzscheans, that difference, non-totalization and indeterminacy of meaning *necessarily* imply arbitrariness and violence" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6).

[16] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.

difference is first a Trinitarian description before it is an anthropological one, and so the nature of difference must be re-thought and rearticulated first as an explication of the divine Trinity. Dionysius the Areopagite provides the template for Milbank's delineation of the Trinity in terms of differential relation. For Dionysius, according to Milbank, the relations of the divine Trinity exhibit a movement "from unity to difference, constituting a relation in which unity *is* through its power of generating difference, and difference *is* through its comprehension by unity."[17] This is not to collapse unity and difference into one another, but rather to offer a redefinition of unity itself in dynamic and relational terms rather than static ones. Two aspects of this account of Trinitarian difference are important here: first, Milbank's conceptualization of the Holy Spirit as "the second difference," and second, his use of the aesthetics of the Baroque.

The Godhead, Milbank argues, exhibits both a "first" and "second" difference—the first corresponding to the Son, the second to the Spirit.[18] The Father-Son relation is rather easy to conceptualize in traditional identity/difference terms: the Father and Son are unified in sharing all things of the Godhead identically, and their difference consists in the Father being not-Son and the Son being not-Father. Personal identity here is constituted in relation to an opposite, and unity consists in charity across this difference. Yet the Spirit, the second difference, introduces a third into this binary relation, opening the relations of the Godhead to a "more than" unity, an excess erupting any simple and

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[17] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430. See also, Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names," 649B, 649C, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Paul Rorem (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

[18] John Milbank, "The Second Difference," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 171–194; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430–431. See also John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1558–1774: Part I The Early Metaphysics* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 116–149.

stable relation between two poles alone. The Spirit is an "equally pure relation to the Father, but 'through' the Son."[19] In other words, the Spirit is the difference that "interprets" the difference of the Son and Father, this interpretation being itself a personal relation (the person of the Holy Spirit), which is the "*ratio* of charity."[20] The second difference is, then, a movement of response to the first difference, a movement which generates an excess of love. As Milbank puts it, "difference, after first constituting unity (the Son causing 'backwards' the Father) becomes a *response* to unity that is more than unity, which unity itself cannot predict—since mediation exceeds unity just as it exceeds difference."[21] The mediation of the Spirit is "a further difference that always escapes,"[22] an excess that breaks open the charity of the Trinity to a dynamic unity that is always unfolding in infinite difference and to a hospitality which receives creation to participate in divine love.[23] The complex unity that characterizes Trinitarian relations of difference in charity, then, is not a static, finished totality but a continuous, infinitely differentiating unfolding of charity. Indeed, Trinitarian unity is so dynamic in this way that Milbank appeals to aesthetic and musical images to delineate it—in particular, the Baroque.

Milbank claims that Trinitarian unity "ceases to be anything hypostatically real in contrast to difference, and becomes instead only the 'subjective' apprehension of a

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[19] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430.

[20] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 430.

[21] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 431.

[22] John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *The Postmodern God*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 274.

[23] Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 191.

harmony displayed in the order of the differences, a desire at work in their midst."[24] Avoiding both Hegelian dialectical and premodern metaphysical renderings of difference which return difference back to a sublated or simple unity,[25] Milbank appeals to the Baroque, its architecture and music, in order to delineate unity as an aesthetic, harmonic ordering of difference. This, no doubt, "entirely reinvents the idea of order," for order now refers to a "purely aesthetic relation of the different, and no longer primarily self-identity or resemblance."[26] Moreover, it is an order which is an infinite unfolding and ecstatic fecundity.[27] In contrast to classical and modern aesthetics, the Baroque, as Milbank understands it, exemplifies this form of infinitely unfolding ordered difference. In the Baroque, "ornamentation overtakes what it embellishes," and a design exists in a "continuous unfolding, which reaches out ecstatically beyond its frame towards its supporting structure."[28] It is the complex and elaborate architecture of the cathedral that Milbank has in mind here, wherein the essential structural features of its design are overrun by their details and excessive features. Yet it is perhaps Baroque music that even better captures this complex harmonic display of difference, for it is in Baroque music that harmony is "stretched to its limits," incorporating maximum dissonance within an unfolding horizontal melody, and thus displaying an "openness to musical grace" wherein

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[24] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 435–436.

[25] As will become clear in the following chapters, I follow a reading of Hegel forged by Gillian Rose, Rowan Williams, and others that contests this reading and argues for a version of dialectical sublation much more open to difference.

[26] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 436.

[27] As Milbank says, "an infinite differentiation that is also a harmony" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 434).

[28] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 436.

it is always possible to reincorporate unexpected difference, unanticipated beauty, into its musical structure.[29] This redefinition of Trinitarian difference-in-unity through the aesthetics of the Baroque leads Milbank to even provocatively suggest that "the infinity of God, his never exhausted 'surplus', means that the context for development is always open to revision by the development. The unity, harmony, and beauty of the emanation of difference cannot, in consequence, be anticipated in advance, even for God himself."[30] Such affirmations of the freedom and creativity of difference show just how insistent Milbank is on preserving the integrity of difference within the Godhead.

These conceptualizations of Trinitarian difference-in-charity through notions of "the second difference" and the Baroque structure Milbank's account of divine sociality. Once difference has been so characterized with respect to the Trinity, it is possible for Milbank to begin to move toward a redefinition and reconstruction of creaturely difference. The principle concept here, for Milbank, is analogy. The now infamous onslaught against nominalism and the univocity of being in *Theology and Social Theory* should be understood not simply as a matter of historical genealogy, for Milbank's recovery of Scholastic *analogia* against univocity is part and parcel of his attempt to defend an ontology of difference-in-charity. For Milbank, it is contemporary forms of nominalism, say, the univocity championed by Deleuze and Guatarri, that threatens an erasure of difference exactly where it intends to upfold the affirmation of pure difference.[31] Milbank thinks such accounts of univocity of being lack the ontological

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[29] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 437.

[30] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 436.

[31] For Deleuze and Guatarri's writing on univocity and difference, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Continuum, 2001), 35–42; Gilles Deleuze and Félix

resources to offer a conception of difference that does not ultimately render it anarchic (lacking a transcendental horizon against which difference might be construed in mutual relation) or flatten difference into sameness (by virtue of its commitment to speak unproblematically about all being and beings similarly, without distinction). The question here is about how differences might relate to one another and on what grounds. Milbank's turn to analogy suggests a configuration of difference not to some "common essence or genus" they might share, but rather on the basis of a "common measure" between differences, a relation of analogy *between* them, which is a "likeness that *only maintains itself through the differences*, and not despite nor in addition to them."[32] This is the critical move of Milbank's analogical account of differential relation: a refusal to order difference to an external common measure, identifying instead a commonness and mutuality between differences in their ordering to one another in charity.

For Milbank, difference operates inside the logics of analogy in two senses. First, analogy names the way differences are related *to each other* in compatible, harmonic patterns, insofar as difference is a feature of the goodness of creation, an expression of the multiplicity of creaturely beauty. Second, analogy names the way the structure of creaturely difference is analogically related *to God*, wherein Triune life exemplifies the pattern of difference-in-charity in its eminent form. I will return to this second use of analogy later in considering Milbank's practical political philosophy, as I will want to demonstrate some of the limits of moving from Trinity to politics in this analogical way. Milbank's use of analogy, I will show, obscures some of the important ways creaturely

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Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3–28.

[32] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 290, emphasis mine.

difference is non-analogous to divine difference. For now, I wish simply to note two problems related to analogy in the first sense. According to Milbank, in order for difference to be related analogically to difference in charity, it must ultimately be "referred" to God, the source of charity. This is what it means for infinite difference to be aesthetically ordered in its unfolding, reflecting the kind of unity-in-difference Milbank has been defending. Following Augustine, Milbank understands evil to consists in a privation of order. As he puts it, "To 'refer' things to the infinite is to arrange them in their proper place in a sequence, and hence 'privation' implies not just inhibition of the flow, but also a false, ugly, misdirection of the flow. Although evil is negative, it can be 'seen' in an ugly misarrangement."[33] Sin, in other words, is difference resisting its final ordering to God. Moreover, this privation is, inherently, a violence—"the denial of Being both as infinite plenitude and as harmonious ordering of difference, or as peace."[34] Milbank construes sin, evil, and violence as a kind of "bad difference"—that is, difference which resists reconciliation.[35]

It is here that Romand Coles, a sympathetic but critical non-theological reader of Milbank, centers his critique of Milbank's Trinitarian difference. Coles wonders how truly other, how different, something can really remain if it ultimately must be "storied" back into a Christian vision of reconciliation.[36] In other words, for Coles, Milbank's

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[33] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 439.

[34] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 440.

[35] "Evil becomes the denial of the hope for, and the present reality of, community" (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 440).

[36] Romand Coles, "Storied Others," 338. In this, Coles says, Milbank is continuing a long tradition of Christian affirmations of difference which "seeks to place all differences self-consciously within Christianity and *excludes* radical externality insofar as the radical other—that which does not understand itself as the Spirit nor the Church—is sin and (in its aspect of self-conscious externality) 'nothing that is.'"

theology is precisely what delimits him from a truly radical account of difference, for it ultimately cannot escape a kind of providentialism and sovereignty which refuses to acknowledge legitimate difference external to Christianity. Difference can be loved, certainly, and Coles affirms Milbank's desire to preserve a certain account of charity toward difference. But the question remains as to whether the different other is loved *in her difference* or *in spite of it*.[37] This is to say, does Milbank affirm difference only insofar as it can be eventually converted, reconciled back into a tamed, Christianized version?[38] Is the promise of conversion a condition for charity? Coles reads Milbank's description of sin—the refusal of peaceful ordering of difference—as another instantiation of colonial Christianity's problematic approach to difference, wherein difference is indexed either to sin or eventual conversion.[39] Coles offers a decolonialized revision of Milbank's thesis—itself a gesture of the kind of charitable engagement with difference Coles exhorts Milbank toward—wherein charity entails a movement of dispossession and affirmation of difference without regard for conversion. To be sure, this is to call Milbank to embrace a rather heterodox form of Christian belief, one which

[37] Similar concerns are evident in critical discourses on liberal multiculturalism and accommodationism. Jason Springs points to former French president Nicholas Sarkozy's commendation of the development of a distinctly "French Islam," to exist harmoniously alongside forms of French Catholicism and French Judaism, as a strategy for incorporating religious difference in the public sphere. Springs refers to this approach as an instance of the "domesticating effect of reasonable accommodation" of difference. See Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 206. See also John R. Bowen, *Can Islam Be French? Pluralism and Pragmatism in a Secular State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[38] As Coles asks, "Can there be either the strength or the generosity required for a difference-affirming charitable practice when one's other appears *a priori* only in a privative light in which conversion is imperative?" (Coles, "Storied Others," 338).

[39] Coles, "Storied Others," 344–345.

entails "the death of [Christianity's] ideological reassurance of its missionary totalism."[40] Coles also, it seems, exhorts an abandonment of traditional notions of sin and reconciliation. Neither I, nor Milbank I imagine, have much desire for this kind of fundamental revision of Christian doctrine. But more than this, one wishes to ask why Coles so fears notions of conversion? Must all forms of conversion entail impositions of power and domination? Is not the possibility of conversion to the other, the discovery of mutuality, central to the kind of radically democratic politics Coles wishes to advance? My account of agonistic democracy delineated in the final chapter of this dissertation will address some of these questions, seeking to move beyond both Milbank's negative construal of conflict and insistence on the reconciliation of difference, as well as Coles' avoidance of conversion. I will argue instead for the conversion of loves through agonistic negotiation. My point here is simply to register a problem in Milbank's vision—namely, that charity amidst difference seems to entail a kind of coerced conversion.[41]

The second point of critique important for my purposes here is raised by the Marxist theorist Kenneth Surin. Surin's curiosities around Milbank's work concern the way analogical accounts of ordered difference retain, even deepen, pre-modern structures of hierarchy.[42] According to Surin, the tradition of analogical thinking Milbank resources

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[40] Coles, "Storied Others," 350, quoting Michel de Certeau, "How is Christianity Thinkable Today?" *Theology Digest* 19, no. 4 (1971): 341.

[41] On the possible coercive and domineering qualities of the kind of charity Milbank advocates, see Roman Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1–23.

[42] Kenneth Surin, *Freedom Not Yet: Liberation and the Next World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 226–231. See also, Kenneth Surin, "Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject," in *Theology and the Political:*

"*necessarily* acknowledges a hierarchy among beings, specified in terms of a being's proximity in principle to the Godhead," and so entails an "ineluctable weddedness to the great chain of being, without which it cannot operate."[43] The reason for this necessary relation, Surin argues, is that analogy always presumes a primary and secondary analogate, wherein one subject (the primary) "produces" the other (the secondary), even if only conceptually, and thus instantiates a relation of derivation and hierarchy. This ordering occasions "the inevitable possibility of the sad or reactive passions arising when a being is lower down on the ontological hierarchy," and Christianity's positing of a preestablished ontological peace in the world, Surin argues, attempts to preemptively resolve this antagonism by divinely sanctioning this hierarchical order as a harmonic one.[44] As my examination of Milbank's practical politics will reveal, Milbank himself does not shy away from, but embraces, such hierarchical notions, developing them in terms of civic hierarchies of virtue and theological sanctionings of authority. It is not, however, unthinkable that one could develop the rather elegant construal of analogical difference Milbank begins in the final chapter of *Theology and Social Theory* in reciprocal, non-hierarchical ways. A number of "grammatical Thomists," for instance, have noted the way Aquinas, perhaps the most sophisticated writer on the doctrine of analogy, refused to identify the hierarchy of beings in the world, which he doubtless affirmed, with the *analogia* of being.[45] That Thomas holds these two ontological realities

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The New Debate, eds. Creston David, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 240–266.

[43] Surin, *Freedom Not Yet*, 230.

[44] Surin, *Freedom Not Yet*, 230.

[45] See Alan Philip Darley, "Predication or Participation? What is the Nature of Aquinas' Doctrine of Analogy?" *The Heythrop Journal* 57, no. 2 (2016): 312–324.

of hierarchy and analogy at some distance, then, at least opens the possibility of developing an account of analogical relation in non-hierarchical terms.

I raise these two points of criticism not because I take them necessarily to be defeaters of the kind of vision Milbank develops. As will be shown further on, my own concerns have less to do with these aspects of analogically related difference and more with the analogical project of mapping creaturely difference and its political negotiation onto Trinitarian life in a way that eclipses important dimensions of creatureliness. Rather, I raise these two points of criticism because they identify important features of difference that my own account of creaturely difference will need to address: first, whether or not a Christian doctrine of creation and redemption entails the complete expulsion of conflicts amidst difference; and second, whether an account of difference-in-charity, rendered through concepts of analogy or otherwise, depends on forms of hierarchy to order difference. As I will show below, Milbank himself seems to answer both of these in the affirmative, advocating hierarchy in order to preclude conflict. I take one of his primary anxieties about democracy to be its aversion to hierarchy and embrace of pluralism, along with its conflicts. The account of creaturely difference and democratic politics I seek to develop in the following chapters, however, contends that a theological politics of difference and charity need not despise conflict nor resort to hierarchical patterns of order. Conflict, I will argue, is actually constitutive of the charitable ordering of difference when pursued in lateral, democratic activity.

To sum up this exposition of Milbank's articulation of Trinitarian and creaturely difference I wish to draw attention once again to how Milbank conceptualizes difference in terms of charitable relation. It is this that constitutes the heart of his intervention in and

contribution to the philosophy of difference, and it is this that will become the cornerstone of his political theological critique of liberalism and neoliberal capitalism. The heart of Milbank's contention is that difference must be seen as ontologically primary, rather than derivative of a prior substantial unity, but that so positioning difference need not—indeed *must not*—entail ontologizing relations of conflict, antagonism, and violence. Moreover, and most importantly, for Milbank, it is only theology—specifically, a theological vision grounded in Trinitarian and analogical thinking—that can achieve this conceptualization of peaceful difference, for it does so through analogical concepts of Trinitarian difference-in-charity. I turn now to an examination of the political theoretical payoff of these metaphysical claims by analyzing Milbank's practical politics.

2.2. The Practical Task: Postliberal Socialism and the Management of Difference

2.2.1. From political ontology to politics. Milbank's postliberal politics of virtue, to which I now turn, rests upon this theological metaphysics of difference. Indeed, part of what makes his a *postliberal* political theology is that politics is grounded not in an account of natural law, a proceduralist theory of justice, or a secular theory of rights, but in a fundamental ontology. With that political ontology in full view, particularly as it concerns the nature of difference, we may now proceed to an analysis of Milbank's practical politics. I will suggest here that Milbank's anxieties about democracy and conflict, embodied in the vision of political society he sets forth, confirm the worries I have set out above concerning the political instantiation of Milbank's Trinitarian account of difference. These were 1) that his account of difference necessitates forms of hierarchy

and management of difference, and 2) that his ontology of peace expunges conflict from human sociality. After unpacking Milbank's postliberal politics of virtue and its confirmation of these worries, I will consider the larger question of whether moving from Trinity to politics in the way Milbank does is appropriate. I will suggest doing so risks running roughshod over important features of being a human creature.

I argued at the beginning of my treatment of his political ontology that Milbank's critique of differential ontologies is fundamentally oriented toward a *political* objective rather than a purely philosophical one. We are now able to see how this is the case. For Milbank, who wishes to articulate a post-capitalist, Christian socialist politics of the common good, ontologies of difference fail to ground a political vision that can sufficiently overcome the problems and contradictions of political liberalism and neoliberal capitalism. As he sees it, ontologies of difference, far from contesting neoliberalism's logics of scarcity, competition, and egoism, actually mirror the kind of metaphysics of competition, individualization, and atomization that neoliberalism presumes. It is no coincidence, in his view, that differential ontologies gained so much traction amidst the birth and rise of neoliberalism and are now falling out of favor amidst the crises of neoliberal order. Postmodern ontologies of difference reproduce the logics of neoliberalism: their insistence on infinite multiplicity, singularity, and difference "grounds only a social *agon* and therefore is complicit with capitalism."[46] As political theories, they fail to offer any serious contestation of neoliberal capitalism insofar as they lack resources to develop a substantial account of mutuality, solidarity, and commonness that might contest capitalist exploitation. Their prioritization of the singularity of

[46] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xxi.

differences and jettisoning of all notions of universality might authorize a micropolitics of care, an ethics of alterity and affirmation, or a praxis of hospitality and tolerance. But lacking a basis for substantial forms of solidarity, these philosophies of difference prove insufficiently political, let alone anticapitalist.[47] As Milbank asserts, they "can undergird a liberal politics of self-satisfied gesture, but not one that attempts to build a new form of just community around an accepted common good: such an enterprise requires instead, as Peter Hallward says, an ontology of relation and mediation, of *metaxu*… 'between' the one and the many."[48] In other words, lacking something like an account of analogy within which one may contexualize the peaceful relation of differences, the possibility of political life beyond neoliberalism seems fantastical for philosophies of difference. In these criticisms, Milbank echoes a dominant strand within contemporary left and Marxist theory which has identified the limits of poststructuralism and postmodern thought more generally for the praxis of radical politics. Difference alone, these critics argue, cannot ground the kind of collectivity needed to contest capital. Ellen Meiksins Wood, for instance, criticizes theories of pure difference on these grounds and calls for a recovery of historical-materialist and class-based analysis wherein difference is reconsidered inside the matrix of class struggle.[49] Doing so, she and others argue, is not an erasure of difference, identity, and the like, but a strategy of locating various oppressions and identity concerns within an account of the material social conditions of capitalist life and

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[47] For a similar critique of Derrida on these grounds, see Rowan Williams, "Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 25–34.

[48] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xxi.

[49] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2016), 256–263.

a strategy of class struggle to overcome it. In somewhat parallel terms, Milbank situates his deconstruction of differential ontologies within an attempt to "defend Christianity and thereby supply again a new ontological and eschatological basis for socialist hope."[50] *Theology and Social Theory*, in my view, provides the ontological ground-clearing for Milbank's articulation of a Christian socialism and politics of the common good.[51] This politics is detailed most comprehensively in his 2016 book *The Politics of Virtue*,[52] co-authored with Adrian Pabst, to which I now turn.

2.2.2. Democratic anxiety and the politics of virtue. According to Milbank, the primary political instantiation of the harmonic sociality of difference he articulates with reference to the Trinity is the *ecclesia*. Catholicity names the way creaturely life participates in divine life by ordering difference in communion. But unlike some postliberal formulations of ecclesial politics,[53] Milbank does not delineate the political consequences of this reality by positioning the church as an alternative to the state. Some postliberals like Stanley Hauerwas have pursued this strategy of accounting for the church *as difference* by articulating Christian politics as peculiar to the Christian *ecclesia* and alien to worldly political communities. Milbank moves in the opposite direction, reclaiming the legacy of Christendom by fusing the ecclesial and the secular in order to

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[50] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xiv.

[51] Milbank delineates his Christian socialism in, among other places, John Milbank, "The Body By Love Possessed: Christianity and Late Capitalism in Britain," *Modern Theology* 3, no. 1 (1986): 36–65; John Milbank, "The Politics of Time: Community, Gift and Liturgy," *Telos* 113 (1998): 41–69; and John Milbank, "Letters to the Editor: A Socialist Economic Order," *Theology* 91 (1988): 412–415.

[52] John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

[53] See Long, *Augustinian and Ecclesial Christian Ethics*, 101–156.

overcome the latter, resulting in a form of Christian governance one might call "postliberal Christian socialism." Both strategies are distinctly postliberal—"antiliberal," even[54]—but while Hauerwas and others seek a reconstitution of the *ecclesia*'s politics as *different from* worldly politics of violence and domination, Milbank seeks to subsume the difference of the world within the comprehensive unity of the church. As he puts it in *Theology and Social Theory*, "The Church, in order to be the Church, must seek to extend the sphere of socially aesthetic harmony—'within' the State where this is possible."[55] To be certain, the political extension of the *ecclesia*'s social harmony seeks not Christian *uniformity* which erases all difference. As I argued above, Milbank believes Christianity is the best shot difference will have in this world, being placed in peaceful relation to others rather than antagonism. Christendom, in Milbank's rearticulation, is not then necessarily at odds with democratic pluralism. It affirms difference, even while seeking its harmonic reconciliation within a fundamental social harmony made possible by Christian governance. For many, this might sound like no allowance for difference at all, only a slightly more nuanced colonizing Christianity with the same ultimate ends as historical Christendom. Nevertheless, this account of Christendom is essentially an extension and concretization of the kind of ordered difference-in-charity Milbank develops in analogical terms in *Theology and Social Theory*. To explain how this "ordering" of difference in charity works in practical political terms, we must understand Milbank's politics of virtue and the common good.

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[54] See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140–161.

[55] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 428.

At the heart of *The Politics of Virtue* is an argument about democracy, how it can be saved from liberalism and reincorporated into a grander political regime ordered to a more ambitious conception of the common good. Liberalism's foundations for democracy are shaky and weak, Milbank and Pabst believe, relying as they do on thin accounts of negative liberty and procedural justice. They seek, alternatively, to articulate the moral foundations of democracy in such a way as to order democracy to the common good. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it, they are interested in "those moral conditions for practicing democracy which democracy alone cannot ensure."[56] That the moral conditions for flourishing democracy are *extra*-democratic, according to Milbank and Pabst, means that democracy and popular political participation must be complemented, supported, and indeed subordinated to political bodies capable of practicing and teaching virtue. Democracy alone, in other words, is insufficient for a politics of virtue. Milbank and Pabst instead develop a politics of "mixed governance," comprised of 1) a democratic populace morally apprenticed by 2) an aristocracy of virtuous elites charged with training, teaching, and forming citizens' moral capacities and sensibilities, and 3) a constitutional monarch tasked with embodying and carrying on the political community's traditions of memory, culture, and institutional knowledge.[57] Well-ordered polities, Milbank and Pabst maintain, exhibit a balance of the "one," the "few," and the "many," who share and receive gifts, skills, and wisdom for the flourishing of all.[58] This mutuality

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[56] Oliver O'Donovan, "*The Politics of Virtue* (book review)," *Modern Theology* 33, no. 3 (2017): 484–488.

[57] For Milbank's delineations of this mixed polity, see John Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," in *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 245–249; Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 205–244. On monarchical rule and "Christic kingship," see Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 249.

[58] Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 83.

and reciprocity of a mixed regime is construed in terms of civic apprenticeship: virtuous elites educate the populace in civic virtue so that a new generation of leaders may emerge to carry on the civic traditions they have received. In such a form of civic apprenticeship each party is dependent on the other. Elites without a populace means republican hierarchy will devolve into oligarchy; a citizenry without elites possessing virtue will lead to a populace exercising power without regard for the common good, including what is best for it.[59] The democratic multitude needs the virtuous "few" in order to become not just a "people" but a political *community*, capable of being directed toward the common good.[60]

It is no surprise, then, that education lies at the center of Milbank and Pabst's postliberal vision.[61] Education—both political and moral, for indeed, these cannot be separated in a politics of virtue—extends far beyond classrooms and includes the manifold bodies and associations of civic life: guilds, religious communities, intermediary governing bodies, etc. In addition, Milbank and Pabst's "civil economy socialism" defends the importance of similar intermediary economic institutions for a truly just and virtuous "gift economy."[62] The "family, guild, fraternity, commune,

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[59] "[A] relatively well educated—morally trained and informed—populace will be better able to sift and refine proposals as to what is 'best' for them by genuinely 'aristocratic' thinkers and innovators at every level" (Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 191).

[60] On the constitution of a democratic "people," and the limitation of political representation, see Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 140–143.

[61] See Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 260–266, 286–294. See also, Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," 249.

[62] "Society is a spiral paradox of 'non-compulsory compulsion,' in which the giving of gifts (and every act and speech act is a gift) half-expects but cannot compel a return gift. This is the very fabric of all human society" (Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 71). See also, Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 137–171; John Milbank, "The Real Third Way: For a New Metanarrative of Capital and the Associationist Alternative," in *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Pope Benedict XVI's Social Encyclical and the Future of Political Economy*, ed. Adrian Pabst (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 27–70.

corporation" are economically critical for just economic life insofar as they provide the relational networks necessary for the cultivation of virtue and education in the common good.[63] The dissolving of these intermediary institutions under capitalism, and the rise of forms of liberalism, both political and economic, wherein persons relate only to the market-state as consumers, workers, and passive citizens, eviscerates the material social conditions for political and economic virtue. Education, then, becomes the acquisition of technical, rather than moral, knowledge and is divorced from the cultivation of political virtue. Milbank and Pabst's postliberal political and economic vision seeks the reconstitution of these intermediary institutions, seeing them as the primary sites of political education, wherein virtue is made possible as desire is transformed and ordered to the common good.

Another way of describing this process of the education, transmission, and formation of political virtue that makes democracy possible, in Milbank and Pabst's view, is the hierarchical ordering of difference. As described above, difference related in charity depends, for Milbank, on a process of ordering, directing, and configuration. We now see the political payoff of such an account of difference: a politics of virtue wherein difference is ordered to the common good via education and the apprenticeship of elites. In other words, it is republican hierarchies of virtue that structure democratic difference. Left alone, difference threatens to undermine the agreement, unity, and social cohesion necessary for socialist community and a politics of virtue. Conflicts, disagreements, and antagonisms manifesting across difference must be reconciled in order for the political community to bear the weight of forming citizens in virtue. Thus, education names the

[63] Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 165; Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," 250–253.

process of difference undergoing conversion to the common good. Education enables the pluralities of the democratic community to be ordered by the virtuous few and directed to the common good. If such a hierarchical politics seems paternalist and ultimately undemocratic, it is because it is. Milbank excoriates forms of direct, and even representative, democracy as lacking the necessary hierarchies to transcend the conflicts of the *demos* and enable a virtuous politics.[64] Democracy, according to Milbank, can only survive when subordinated to undemocratic forms of rule. The real rationale for democratic pluralism is *extra*-democratic and the legitimacy of popular assent lies in its eventual conversion, through education and training in virtue, to the common good.[65] Democracy, that is, is conducive to virtue, but only under certain circumstances: insofar as difference can be ordered within a hierarchy of civic virtue, so that it does not threaten the stability of a unified body politic.[66] We see, then, Milbank's aversion to conflict in both a metaphysical and political register—the latter precisely because of the former. If politics seeks the concrete instantiation of metaphysical commitments about humans, the

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[64] Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 142–152, 215–216; Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 199.

[65] Milbank, "Liberality versus Liberalism," 245; Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 239–240. One of Milbank's most affirmative statements about the possibility of democracy is in *The Future of Love*: "[T]he only justification for democracy is theological; since the people is potentially the *ecclesia*, and since nature always anticipates grace, truth lies finally dispersed amongst the people (although they need the initial guidance of the virtuous) because the Holy Spirit speaks through the voice of all" (245). Daniel Bell writes of this aspect of Milbank's position on democracy, "[T]his democracy is not the agonistics of clashing opinions that always gives way, if surreptitiously, to power but rather is a form of discerning the truth that is dispersed." See Bell, "Postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy," 127.

[66] It is important to note, however, that Milbank sees these non-democratic hierarchies as enabling more, not less, democracy. Elsewhere, speaking of the church, he writes, "[C]ontrary to all the assumptions of secular sovereignty, it is all the more democratic the more it is genuinely hierarchical. Moreover…this is the only possible real democracy, and the most extremely democratic" (John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 108).

world, and God, then political rule must aspire to order difference in harmonic relations of charity, expunging conflict from the political community.

We see, then, in Milbank's postliberal Christian socialism both an anxiety about democracy, its perceived inability to successfully negotiate difference, and a program for managing conflict and difference through hierarchical forms of governance and education. In his view, conflict and difference threaten the moral conditions for democracy, conditions which he believes are secured by the virtuous few who discern the metaphysically true and implement it in practical politics. Popular will authorizes this rule, assents to it, rather than directly enacting the contents of that will. If politics is to exhibit the practical instantiation of a fundamental political ontology, as Milbank believes, then political judgments must ultimately be decided by those who know the good, true, and beautiful. Democracy must be tethered to the metaphysically true and guarded by the philosophical rule of elites rather than risked by placing it in the hands of popular power.

The important point here is that Milbank insists difference and its conflicts must be ordered *non-democratically*. My contention in the chapters to follow is not that difference and its conflicts are in no need of charitable ordering—with this much I agree with Milbank. Difference absent forms of commonness and shared judgment cannot achieve the collective emancipatory politics I am interested in. Rather, I argue that the ordering of difference—the praxis of generating commonness and collectivity across difference—can be pursued *democratically* without resort to the kind of hierarchical politics Milbank prescribes. Indeed, I will suggest that ordering difference in charity through the negotiation of conflict is precisely what democratic politics *is*. My point here

is to note the limits of Milbank's postliberal politics for democracy and the ways his articulation of difference at a metaphysical register ultimately leads to hierarchy in the realm of politics, in order to prevent difference from undermining the common good. Milbank's turn to non-democratic, hierarchical governance to ensure the stability and coherence of the political community reveals the way he remains captive to a framing of political community and difference in oppositional terms, even as his account of difference-in-charity attempts to overcome this opposition. Milbank ultimately privileges community to difference, allowing only as much of the latter as will leave the former stable and secure.

I have intended to detail how the practical concretization of Milbank's political ontology confirms Surin and Coles's worries about hierarchy and the colonization of difference. And this to say nothing of Milbank's unfortunate affirmations of elements of European colonial expansion, British imperialism, and exhortations to a renewed European-led global political order, all of which further confirm the worrisome nature of Milbank's chauvinistic attitude toward difference.[67] The harmonic reconciliation of difference that he aspires to ultimately manifests in a colonial ordering of difference by way of subjugation. Yet this is only one worrisome aspect of Milbank's political theology I wish to interrogate. The second problematic aspect is not simply with hierarchy but with Milbank's specific approach to conflict. I conclude this section, then, by drawing attention to Milbank's aversion to democratic conflict, suggesting it reveals a limitation of his entire mode of theorizing political life analogically from Trinitarian life.

[67] See, for instance, John Milbank, "The Blue Labor Dream," in *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, ed. Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 43–46; Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 347–378.

2.3. Sociality, Creaturely and Trinitarian

We can sum up the basic logic of Milbank's postliberal Augustinian political theology as follows: creation possesses a fundamental ontology of harmonic sociality which manifests as difference-in-charity; creation possesses this in virtue of an analogical or participatory relationship to the Trinitarian God who is "transcendental peace through differential relation"; politics entails the practical ordering of difference so as to instantiate the social harmony and flourishing natural to humans as social animals created in the image of the socially harmonious Trinity. I have sketched this account above as a movement from political ontology to practical politics. Considered theologically, it is also a move from the social Trinity to political reflection, a pattern of thought Milbank shares with a number of other contemporary political theologians.[68] Insofar as this Trinitarian politics seeks to challenge liberal and neoliberal capitalist visions of humans as individualized, acquisitive, and fundamentally competitive with a theological anthropology that privileges sociality and mutuality, I endorse the endeavor, at least its political intentions. Nevertheless, my exposition of Milbank's Trinitarian politics has revealed crucial reasons to worry about what such analogical thinking obscures about human creatureliness by over-emphasizing the likeness of human and divine sociality. In short, Milbank's political vision is insufficiently *creaturely*. The attempt to theorize politics, especially as it regards difference, directly from Trinitarian commitments raises

[68] See, for instance, Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 66–71; Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 1981). A similar argument is made by Ian A. McFarland, *Difference & Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), not in terms of the relation of social Trinity to politics, but rather in an attempt to use Trinitarian logics to construe an account of human difference and unity and a corresponding ethical vision. For a critical analysis of these works and others, see, Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000): 432–445.

a critical question I have hinted at already at various points: Is there any proper place for *conflict* amidst difference in Milbank's political vision, or is conflict entirely alien to flourishing political community? It seems, for Milbank, conflict is thoroughly negative, undermining a virtuous politics. His constant interchange of the terms "conflict" and "violence" in *Theology and Social Theory* suggests as much—the former always being reduced to the latter.[69] For Milbank, every conflict must be reconciled in peaceful relation, every clashing of difference ultimately resolved, every dissonance incorporated into harmony. Conflict, for Milbank, is fundamentally indexed to sin, the absence of harmonic relations between difference. Because Trinitarian sociality exhibits infinite harmony amidst difference without conflict or discord, so, he suggests, should human creatures and their political communities.

I raise this point now, waiting to address it fully at a later juncture. Doing so, and reimaging the theological and political significance of conflict, will be the task of the following chapters. For now, I wish only to anticipate that discussion by suggesting the movement from social Trinity to human politics risks obscuring the way creaturely sociality, unlike divine sociality, is constituted by conflicts that emerge out of human finitude and the diversity and multiplicity of creaturely goods. Conflict, I will argue in the following chapters, is a feature of creaturely goodness and generative of flourishing political life.

[69] On this point, see Peter C. Blum, "Two Cheers for an Ontology of Violence: Reflections on Im/possibility," in *The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation*, ed. Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 7–26; Debra Dean Murphy, "Power, Politics, and Difference: A Feminist Response to John Milbank," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 2 (1994): 135–136; Nicholas Lash, "Not Exactly Politics or Power?" *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (1992): 358.

In this analysis of postliberal Augustinianism, I have shown the strengths and weaknesses of accounting for the theological meaning of political difference in Trinitarian terms. Milbank's way of configuring the relationship between political community and difference in terms of analogical relations of charity successfully recovers the way mutuality and sociality are ontologically basic to human creatures, natural capacities, so to speak. Liberal and neoliberal political formations must be contested in their reduction of human persons and communities to logics of competition and atomization. What is needed for a truly emancipatory, anticapitalist politics is a vision of political community wherein difference is affirmed while yet being ordered to commonness and collectivity. On these matters, I agree with Milbank and seek to extend his essential insights. Yet, as the following chapters will demonstrate, I move away from Milbank's construal of political community and difference in several key ways. First, I eschew the anti-democratic features of Milbank's politics. Whereas he sees hierarchy as essential to the ordering of difference in mutuality and charity, I turn to recent work in radical democratic theory to argue for the capacities of democratic organizing to yield shared judgments and collectivity without resort to strict hierarchies. Second, I move beyond an analogical framing of politics as directed by Trinitarian commitments. While I do not wish to suggest human sociality lacks a participatory relation to divine sociality, I am more interested in the unique aspects of *creaturely* sociality, its unlikeness to the Triune God. In place of Milbank's divine politics, I seek a more creaturely one indexed to human finitude, contingency, and embodiment. Third, as I turn from Trinitarian analogy to the politics of creaturehood, I wish to re-center the place of conflict in creaturely life and its potential for generating political community. Appreciative of the insights of

Milbank's postliberal Augustinianism, I nevertheless wish to move beyond its limitations. Before doing so, however, I consider another form of Augustinianism endeavoring to move beyond political theology's troubling relationship to political difference.

3. Augustinian Civic Liberalism: Political Community and Difference in the Saeculum

If the postliberal Augustinian politics articulated by John Milbank represents one prominent way of construing the relationship of political community and difference, one that directly challenges liberalism, a second approach is represented by theologians who seek to enliven the tradition of liberal political theorizing, even while making important immanent critiques of it. This perspective, of which Eric Gregory and Charles Mathewes are the best representatives, also sees Augustine as central to its political vision, but it employs Augustine's thought in such a way as to theologically reimagine, rather than reject, liberal democratic citizenship. Like my treatment of postliberal Augustinianism above, I consider Augustinian civic liberalism here in two main parts: first, its political ontology and reimagining of pluralism in sacramental, participatory terms, and second, its practical politics—what it calls a theology or ethics of citizenship—considered in terms of civic virtue, *ascesis*, and the order of love. These two major sections are bookended by a brief introduction to the project of Augustinian civic liberalism and a concluding critical evaluation of its construal of political community and difference and the place of conflict therein.

3.1. The New Augustinians: Civic Liberalism and Republican Citizenship

In wake of the rise of postliberal political theology in the late twentieth century, a number of reactions in the first two decades of the twenty-first century have sought to

question its viability and presuppositions. One especially important response is a set of theological re-engagements with liberal theory inspired, in part, by Jeffrey Stout's enormously influential 2004 book *Democracy and Tradition*. Stout's argument concerning democracy, religion, and virtue opened up space for theologians to reimagine democratic citizenship in theological terms, as well as engage new articulations of liberal politics in recent political theory which have sought a recovery of civic republican themes.[70] Stout's invitation to theologians and religious ethicists to re-engage democratic theory has been taken up in a number of important works in the years following the publication of *Democracy and Tradition*. Among them are two decidedly Augustinian thinkers: Eric Gregory and Charles Mathewes. Gregory and Mathewes, along with their students, have developed a renewed theological approach to liberal politics that can broadly be termed "Augustinian civic liberalism." This term is specifically employed by Gregory in his important 2008 book *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethics of Democratic Citizenship*[71] and helps to capture three important elements of this developing school of thought: the critical role of Augustine and the Augustinian tradition, the inheritance of traditions of liberal political thought, and the felt need to revise liberal theory along civic republican lines to develop an account of civic virtue.

These "new Augustinians"[72] thus have a complicated relationship to both liberal political theory and previous attempts to engage that body of theory through Augustinian

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[70] On the relationship of Stout's book to these new movements in Augustinian political theology, see Jonathan Tran, "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 521–547.

[71] Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethics of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[72] I use this term to distinguish the kind of political Augustinianism represented by Gregory and Mathewes from earlier Augustinian liberal strategies, which I consider below. The difference between

theological categories. The latter generated a body of work in the twentieth century often referred to as "Augustinian liberalism." Consisting of realist appropriations of Augustine's theology of sin and eschatology by figures like Reinhold Niebuhr and R. A. Markus, as well as attempts to join Augustinian moral psychology and epistemology to Rawlsian notions of procedural justice by figures like Paul Weithman and Edmund Santurri, Augustinian liberalism used Augustine's theology to conceptualize the politics of liberal societies.[73] Gregory and Mathewes build on this school of thought, even while criticizing it and seeking to expand its imaginative horizons. Doubtless, they maintain, there exists an important relationship between Augustine and liberalism: Augustine was himself no liberal, and yet his theological legacy offers crucial elements conducive to liberal politics. For Mathewes, the compatibility between Augustine and liberalism lies not so much in their respective "realist" orientations, as earlier liberals maintained, nor in a reading of Augustine's *saeculum* as a Rawlsian neutral public sphere.[74] Rather, Augustine helpfully offers a deflationary account of the political which sees earthly citizenship as ordered to and tempered by eschatological citizenship in the *civitas Dei*. This deflationary account of the political—whose ends are relative peace and stability while the Christian pilgrimages to her heavenly polity—possesses a certain likeness to liberal theories of the state which claim to aspire not to transcendental ends or the

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Gregory and Mathewes notwithstanding, I take them to be advocating quite similar approaches to Christian political engagement in liberal politics.

[73] For a helpful typology of Augustinian liberalism, see Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 75–148.

[74] See Edmund Santurri, "Rawlsian Liberalism, Moral Truth, and Augustinian Politics," *Journal of Peace and Justice Studies* 8, no. 2 (1997): 1–36; and Paul J. Weithman, "Toward an Augustinian Liberalism," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth Matthews (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 304–322.

instantiation of a particular vision of the good, but rather to the provision of basic, minimalist conditions of peace and stability for individual liberty.[75] The liberal state, in other words, desires not the moral perfection of its citizens but non-interference with their exercise of liberty. Like Augustine, "the liberal state wisely shuns," Mathewes writes, a "reduction of the human to the citizen. Liberal citizenship is more a negative reality than a positive one, as liberals see politics as a necessity, not an intrinsic good."[76] In this view, Christianity, by claiming citizens' ultimate allegiances, actually helps foster a liberal "politics of limits" and ironic distance to the political community that curbs absolutist or utopian proclivities and tendencies to invest the political with ultimate meaning.[77] Augustinian civic liberals, like their Augustinian liberal predecessors, laud liberalism's suspicion of collectivism, political community, and the tyranny of the state over the individual[78]—or, in the terms I have been using above, subjugating difference to

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[75] Charles Mathewes, "Augustinian Christian Republican Citizenship," in *Political Theology for a Plural Age*, ed. Michael Jon Kessler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 232–233.

[76] Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 234.

[77] As Mathewes argues, Christians "have another community to which they ascribe real (indeed, ultimate) political import, one that also claims their allegiance, and that does so in a higher and more total way than the liberal state. And so Christian citizens appear not only as citizens but, in an indirect and complicated way, they may also appear, at least in civil society, assembled in churches, which are a standing rebuke to every state's ambition—spoken or unspoken—to offer a complete community for its inhabitants. In this way, faith constantly disrupts and disturbs the polity's tendency toward narcissistic idolatry. In civic terms, we can say that by splitting Christian citizens' loyalties, refusing to allow them to slothfully resettle on one worldly axis of value and privileging a radically different end over patriotism, Christian faith constantly disrupts the polity's tendencies toward absolutism" (Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 236).

[78] "[T]otalitarianism is what liberalism fears and sets itself up to oppose" (Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 229). According to Mathewes, at the heart of the liberal tradition is a concept of privacy, "the idea that each person has at their core the right not to be controlled by another" (Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 228).

monolithic formations of political community. This they see as an essential compatibility between Augustine's "politics of limits" [79] and liberalism's minimalist aspirations.[80]

Augustinian civic liberals, then, are liberals insofar as they see a chief duty of the state to be protecting and respecting difference. Indeed, it is precisely because of its commitment to difference that they wish to reclaim liberalism from postliberal critics like Milbank whose politics of the common good, in their view, threatens an erasure of difference. Yet Augustinian civic liberals also wish to revise liberal theory in important ways to develop an account of civic virtue and challenge liberalism's individualism and cynical orientation toward community. They envision liberal politics in terms both more *civic republican* and more *theological* than their Augustinian liberal forebears. With respect to the former, Gregory and Mathewes appropriate the insights of civic republican turns in recent liberal scholarship in order to propose an "ethics of citizenship" and civic virtue. Civic republicanism, for them, provides a compelling alternative to both communitarianism and liberalism, which have dominated Christian political theology in recent decades. Communitarians like Milbank, Mathewes argues, "believe there is some sort of finality to the political process…with some final *telos* being a unified nation" or moral community.[81] Such postliberal options imagine political community in too unified terms, while liberals conceive of the political in too minimalist and contractualist terms.

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[79] On Augustine's "politics of limits," see Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

[80] Of course, this presumes the liberal state actually works in this way. For a challenge to this conception of the liberal state, and a contention that liberalism embodies a kind of totalitarianism, both in terms of geopolitical imperialism and capitalist structure, see Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[81] Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174–175.

The end of politics for civic republicans is instead more "positive, individualistic, and immanent" than either liberals or communitarians acknowledge: "authentic self-rule," which consists in "positive" liberty and the cultivation and exercise of civic virtue.[82] In other words, civic republicanism imagines political community in more minimalist terms than postliberals and more expansive ones than traditional liberals. The political community is not an end in itself, it maintains, but a domain wherein individuals participate in self-rule, an activity constitutive of human flourishing wherein one perfects virtue.[83] Political community is a penultimate good, subordinated to these primary activities of participation and citizenship.

This invocation of virtue brings us to the second way Augustinian civic liberals seek to move beyond their Augustinian liberal predecessors. Whereas the latter saw the political as essentially a concession to human sinfulness, Augustinian civic liberals consider it a space of divine action and Christian moral development. As Gregory puts it, Augustine offers "more than a counsel against idolatry" when it comes to politics; Augustinianism must risk "saying something about the mysterious and hidden ways of God, even in political action."[84] Bringing together republican theories of virtue and more recent Augustinian scholarship that emphasizes Augustine's sacramental ontology, moral

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[82] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 176.

[83] "Far from being the furnace in which a national identity is fused, politics ensures no civic consensus gains a stultifying grip on the body politic. Political engagement does not make the nation; it makes *citizens*" (Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 177).

[84] Eric Gregory, "Strange Fruit: Augustine, Liberalism, and the Good Samaritan," in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*, ed. George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 108. Gregory goes on, "Some still need to be reminded of Augustinian limits and the enigmas of temporal life. But in a world that has largely abandoned any hopes for redemption (in this life or the next), articulating the possibility of redemptive agency in the world strikes me as urgent. Such a political theology might offer more than critique, even for those who long for another city after time."

psychology, and incarnational theology, they challenge caricatures of Augustinianism as a dour realism which views politics as corrupting of Christian virtue. Augustine, rather, suggests a perspective on political activity as participation in God, encounter with grace, and transformation into the image and likeness of Christ. To further delineate this, I turn first to detail Augustinian civic liberalism's political ontology, and second its practical politics of *ascesis* and ordering loves.

3.2. Political Ontology: Saeculum *and Sacramental Pluralism*

"Modernity's quarrel with Augustine," Mathewes claims, is "fundamentally about ontology, about the nature of creation itself."[85] Like Milbank, Augustinian civic liberals are interested in how a theologically informed political ontology might expand the Christian imagination for political life. Like Milbank, they also turn to Augustine to construe this fundamental ontology as it relates to questions of pluralism, otherness, difference, and sociality. Yet unlike Milbank, Augustinian civic liberals see in Augustine a perspective on the political and its pluralistic configuration that identifies the encounter with difference as a domain of grace. In contrast to his postliberal Augustinianism, difference is not to be *ordered* through politics, but patiently *endured*, negotiated in forbearance, as a way of encountering the divine Other in the human other. Underlying the political philosophy of Augustinian civic liberalism, then, is a fundamental ontology which regards otherness and plurality as conditions of creatureliness and participation in God. Liberal pluralism, for these Augustinians, is sacramental.

Contesting commonplace assumptions about Augustine's theology as otherworldly, individualist, and interiorly oriented, Mathewes and Gregory uncover in

[85] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 78.

Augustine an affirmation of the world and public life as filled with divine presence. For Gregory, Christ's incarnation is the centerpiece of Augustine's affirmation of a participatory relationship of the world in God, where proper love of one entails love of the other. "Augustine's God is a worldly God," he writes, and is "to be recognized in the intersubjectivity accomplished through the revelation of Christ as the divine neighbor." [86] For Augustine, "To love God is to love the whole of creation existing in God. The love for God is expressed in an ordered love that loves God *in loving* God's world, a world that bears 'His footprints' (*CD* II.28)."[87] Augustine's incarnational theology, Gregory contends, is precisely what pushes him beyond the Platonist tendencies he is so often accused of: the incarnation "issues a challenge to any form of deistic or Neoplatonic ontology that perpetuates a competitive tournament of loves between God and the world."[88] In Christ, divinity is joined to humanity such that the two love commands can never be separated. To love God entails the love of the human neighbor, for Christ is both divine and human neighbor in his incarnation.[89] Christ binds himself to the "least of these" (Mat. 25:31–46) such that in loving them one truly loves Christ.[90] In Gregory's

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[86] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 323.

[87] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 323, emphasis original. Gregory is here referring to Augustine's *City of God*.

[88] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 330.

[89] Gregory has been deeply influenced by Karl Barth's interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable and his identification of Christ as the "divine neighbor." See Eric Gregory, "The Double Love Command and the Ethics of Religious Pluralism," in *Love and Christian Ethics: Tradition, Theory, and Society*, eds. Frederick V. Simmons and Brian C. Sorrells (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 342; and Eric Gregory, "'The Gospel within the Commandment': Karl Barth on the Parable of the Good Samaritan," in *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth,* ed. Daniel Migliore (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 34–55.

[90] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 348–350.

adept hands, Augustine's *uti*/*frui* distinction is properly interpreted in its Christological context to identify "use" of earthly loves as the participatory manner of partaking in divine "enjoyment."

Mathewes likewise seeks a recovery of Augustinian "worldliness" by retrieving Augustine's sacramental vision of creation.[91] For Augustine, he argues, creation is semiotically sacramental, a world of material "signs" that convey and gesture to their divine signified. "Creation itself, properly understood," according to Augustine, "*speaks* of God."[92] Through interpretation, response, engagement, and interaction with these diverse signs one comes to participate in the Creator who spoke them into existence and the *Logos* in whom all *logoi* share. In this way, according to Mathewes, Augustine enables "a theological interpretation of the world as a form of participation, through Christ, in the church, in the divine *perichoresis*."[93] In Mathewes's view, Augustine's politics is, far from the pessimism ascribed to him by Augustinian Christian realists, an extension of this sacramental ontology and "part of a wider appreciation of the goodness of God's creation and a recognition of our obligations for its sustenance."[94] Politics is an extension of the goodness of sacramental creation.

The theological piece which ties Augustine's sacramental ontology to an account of politics is his notion of the *saeculum*. Importantly, while some readers of Augustine have wrongly interpreted him to envision a secular and neutral *space* wherein earthly

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[91] Charles Mathewes, "A Worldly Augustinianism: Augustine's Sacramental Vision of Creation," *Augustinian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 333–348.

[92] Mathewes, "Worldly Augustinianism," 341, emphasis mine. See also Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 100–104.

[93] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 26.

[94] Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 226.

politics occurs, Gregory and Mathewes recover the fundamentally theological and temporal character of the *saeculum*. The *saeculum* is the time between Christ's first and second advents, the temporal domain of political life, governed by divine providence and thus filled with divine presence. The *saeculum* is, in Gregory's words, "that mixed time when no single religious vision can presume to command comprehensive, confessional, and visible authority."[95] In other words, for Augustinian civic liberals, *saeculum* is the theological designation of political *pluralism*. In the *saeculum*, "diversity has been made a gift to the church through divine providence,"[96] and difference becomes a means by which Christians respond to God and "reshape our existence and redirect our desires in response to grace."[97] In the hands of Augustinian civic liberals, the *saeculum* is not a capitulation to sin nor devoid of divine grace but the designation of what I will call a "sacramental pluralism." The reason pluralism is sacramental, and the reason the *saeculum* is thus filled with divine presence, is that the earthly neighbor bears the grace of the divine neighbor and the human other conveys an aspect of divine Otherness. Divine presence is not confined to the eternal City of God, nor to the church, but is dispersed in the world,[98] and particularly in one's engagement in public life and the encounter with otherness.

Negotiating otherness, in fact, is the heart of Augustinian civic liberalism's account of pluralist politics. As Mathewes puts it, "What modernity calls pluralism we should see, in theological terms, as the challenge of otherness, a challenge demanding a

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[95] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of* Love, 79.

[96] Gregory, "Ethics of Religious Pluralism," 339.

[97] Gregory, "Ethics of Religious Pluralism," 340.

[98] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 129.

rich theological response."[99] In the human other one discovers "the otherness present most fundamentally in the otherness of the divine Trinity."[100] The human other, that is, manifests "that most basic otherness, that of God."[101] This is not so much to sacralize difference as it is to posit the way in which difference challenges, questions, and demands response and change, parabolically mirroring the operations of divine grace, which confronts the self from without to provoke the self's conversion to God. In other words, a theological account of otherness, such as the one Mathewes and Gregory offer, sees difference as inviting dialogical encounter wherein Christians confess, witness to, and proclaim the truth while opening themselves to the grace of self-revision, conversion, and receptivity to newness. The dialogical encounter with difference that pluralist politics occasions demands not "vapid amiability where one is wholly content to be part of a directionless exchange of viewpoints,"[102] but rather genuine argument and contestation in pursuit of wisdom. As Gregory puts it, "Improvisation, argument, and discovery are endemic to the confession of grace and ongoing recognition of the Spirit."[103] In encountering the other, one might, in fact, meet God. If this seems to render the political other in near-sacramental terms—manifesting the grace of God by means of pluralist

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[99] Charles Mathewes, "Pluralism, Otherness, and the Augustinian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 1 (1998): 84. Put differently, "In pluralism, what initially seems a contingent political question is revealed to be a deep and inescapable metaphysical issue" (Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 115).

[100] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 109.

[101] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 115.

[102] Gregory, "Ethics of Religious Pluralism," 335, quoting Gene Outka, "Theocentric Love and the Augustinian Legacy: Honoring Differences and Likenesses between God and Ourselves," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002): 98–99.

[103] Gregory, "Ethics of Religious Pluralism," 339.

politics—Gregory confirms this is exactly what Augustinian civic liberalism is up to: "the event of mutual encounter is itself a transfiguring sacrament of grace."[104]

For Augustinian civic liberals, Augustine's vibrant ontology, rather than abstract notions of sin or eschatology, is the centerpiece of a theological account of politics. Joining that ontology to Augustine's account of the *saeculum*, Augustinian civic liberals perceive liberal pluralism to be sacramental—the domain of God's self-disclosure. Politics is filled with divine presence such that, as Mathewes puts it, "Augustinians can affirm that public life can be a way for humans to come to participate in God."[105] That politics is, in the end, about divine participation, the Christian's experience of grace in the earthly city while on pilgrimage to the heavenly city, means that Augustine's political theology can be construed as an *ascetics* and civic virtue reconceived in theological terms as the ordering of love. Thus, I turn now from Augustinian civic liberalism's political ontology to its practical politics.

3.3. Pilgrim Politics: Ascesis *and the Order of Love*

Recall that John Milbank's postliberal vision saw the proper end of politics as the ordering of difference within a comprehensive vision of the common good and socialist political community. Far from the Augustinianism of liberals like Niebuhr and his followers, Milbank's Augustinianism saw the vocation of the *Ecclesia militans* to be one of instantiating the peace of Christ through earthly political rule. Augustinian civic liberals eschew this kind of politics of the common good in favor of more minimalist

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[104] Gregory, "Ethics of Religious Pluralism," 342. Gregory goes on, "The neighbor is *actually* the bearer of the mercy of God in the drama of salvation. In and through wounded humanity, we are opened to the goodness of God in the sacred presence of the neighbor."

[105] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 21.

liberal goals, even while supplementing that minimalist orientation to the political with an account of civic virtue.[106] For them, Augustine offers a pilgrim politics. Christians, as pilgrims in the earthly city, approach political activity not so much to realize a particular vision of the good or to build a just society, but rather to cultivate virtue, secure temporal peace, and prepare for political life in the eschatological city of God, the only just *res publica*. Consequently, Augustinian civic liberals approach difference not as a threat to political flourishing, nor as something to be converted or ordered, but rather as something to be patiently endured in forbearance. Encountering difference can occasion transformation in grace, the self's growing into God as it suffers the human other, for one is trained in charity by bearing difference in love. Liberal politics, in this Augustinian vision, is concerned therefore with respect for difference and the flourishing of a diverse, pluralistic public sphere. Like Augustine himself, Augustinian civic liberals are suspicious of attempts to Christianize the *saeculum*. Doing so both fails to recognize the *saeculum* as the time wherein earthly politics is properly mixed and plural, as well as invests too much in the realization of perfect justice in a temporal political order that cannot bear it. The Christian pilgrim thus forges a common life with others in the pluralistic *civitas terrena*, but with a proper Augustinian detachment from the claims of earthly polities. Augustinian civic liberalism aims not for the realization of perfect justice but the cultivation of civic virtue. Mathewes pursues this pilgrim politics by developing what he calls an "ascetics of citizenship"; Gregory through an "ethics of citizenship" centered on the "order of love." I consider each in turn.

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[106] As Gregory puts it, he wishes to "reconstruct a kind of *Augustinian civic virtue* that might in turn encourage a more ambitious political practice. By more 'ambitious' political practice, I mean the promotion of an actual society that is more just, more egalitarian, and more charitable" (Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 8).

If public life is indeed the domain of divine grace and activity, one may approach politics, Mathewes believes, expecting to undergo the operations of divine grace: conversion, reordering, sanctification, and transformation. In short, politics for Mathewes, and ultimately for Augustine himself, is about *ascesis*, the transformation of the soul in preparation for eternal life with God. Public life, he writes, "can be understood ascetically, as a means of purifying the soul for God: the ascesis of citizenship…as part of the ascesis of discipleship."[107] Moreover, because everlasting communion with God is, for Augustine, also a social reality—communion with others in the *civitas Dei*—earthly politics is a proleptic participation in, and preparation for, the politics of beatitude.[108] As Mathewes says, "engagement in the earthly city helps fit us for the heavenly city to come."[109] Specifically, it is the encounter and negotiation with diverse others that ascetically cultivates one's capacities for eternal communion with the divine Other and the saints of God. Engagement with these others in public life is then construed through two dominant Augustinian themes: confession and conversion. Regarding the former, confession names something more than a spiritual practice; confession is, more broadly, an "orientation" toward public life, "an openness to transforming, and being transformed by, the other."[110] Insofar as asceticism is fundamentally about vulnerability, Mathewes argues, the ascetics of citizenship is about "learning to suffer in the right way."[111]

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[107] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 21.

[108] See also, Eric Gregory, "Politics and Beatitude," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2017): 199–206.

[109] Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 234.

[110] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 87.

[111] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 11.

Suffering otherness—"being acted upon" by another—is an activity of patience and receptivity. And such suffering is part and parcel of confession, wherein one stakes oneself and one's claims in public intending to be interrogated, challenged, and scrutinized by others.[112] This is the nature of Augustinian *confessio*, Mathewes maintains, having in the mind the cycles of declaration, questioning, and divine interrogation which drive Augustine's *Confessions*. "Christian faith exhibits," he writes, "the soul's ascetical struggle to resist its own sinful desires for closure, cessation, and death in favor of participating in God's infinite, endless ecstatic love of the world; it reveals the endlessness of our inquiry into God and God's love."[113] Politically speaking, confession signifies the Christian's posture of openness, receptivity, and vulnerability to the other within a pluralist political practice of negotiation, disputation, argument, and exchange. Therein, one suffers difference anticipating the work of grace in the reordering of one's desires, loves, knowledge, and commitments.

Mathewes's account of confession already anticipates the second major Augustinian theme which drives his politics as it regards difference: conversion. Recall that conversionism was a worry registered above with respect to Milbank's colonialist tendencies. Here, the matter is flipped on its head, for Mathewes advocates not the converting of difference—"storying" otherness, as Coles put it—but being converted *by* difference. Read theologically, the encounter with difference, and the various struggles and negotiations with diverse others involved in pluralist politics, can be seen as a

[112] Mathewes develops this, with reference to H. Richard Niebuhr, in terms of "non-defensive confessionalism." See Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 210–212.

[113] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 199.

"struggle over peoples' loves."[114] In such struggle, persons' loves and desires can be reordered, redirected, and converted to God and neighbor. Conversion, in other words, is prompted by confronting difference. As Mathewes puts it:

> This Augustinian account sees conversion as partly a matter of growing into a new knowledge of difference—a new knowledge of what separates humans from one another. In becoming something new, one understands one's previous beliefs differently, and may (and indeed *ought to*) thereby come to a deeper awareness of and sensitivity to the differences separating persons from one another.[115]

Conversion, for Mathewes, is the process by which one undergoes transformation of one's loves and desires in preparation for eternal life with God. Political engagement in the pluralist *saeculum* occasions this *ascesis*, where one's conversion is accomplished "not by shunning other humans, but by engaging them."[116]

Gregory pursues a similar line of thought concerning political engagement and difference but with attention to Augustine's *ordo amoris*, which Augustine believed was a "brief and true definition of virtue."[117] Following Augustine, Gregory sees human persons and societies as characterized most fundamentally by their loves.[118] Under the

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[114] Charles Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony: Christian Political Participation Beyond Liberalism," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001): 127. I return to this essay in later chapters, as I see it to represent Mathewes at a much different place, politically speaking, than his more recent writings on liberalism and civic republicanism. In this early essay, Mathewes offers a theological engagement with radical democratic and agonist theory, construing conflictual politics as a kind of ascetics in a manner I will take up and further develop. My reading of Mathewes's political trajectory is to see it as a movement away from this more radical moment to an embrace of liberal politics.

[115] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 122. Mathewes goes on, "The return to right relation with God, and the elimination of untoward differences between God and humans (and among humans as well), are thus accomplished not by shunning other humans, but by engaging them; not by turning away, but by turning towards. Conversion does not draw humans out of the world; rather it puts them more fully, and more properly, *into* it" (123).

[116] Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 122.

[117] Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), XV.22.

[118] "A self always stands in relation to the world, including the political world, in terms of her loves" (Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 21).

conditions of sin, human loves, both personal and social, are "disordered, misdirected, and disproportionate."[119] Grace entails the reordering and healing of disordered loves and politics participates in this work: "True virtue is a matter of loving well and loving freely. Justice is about getting our loves arranged in the appropriate manner, giving and receiving love in the right sorts of ways."[120] Civic virtue, thematized in terms of the *ordo amoris*, thus refers to the ways political engagement facilitates the right ordering of human love for God and neighbor. Whereas both critics of Augustine like Hannah Arendt and followers of Augustine like Niebuhr believed love to be antithetical to true political action, Gregory is intent to reinsert love into a discussion of politics, making it a central civic virtue.[121] For him, the field of politics is exactly where love finds a home. "Political action, which promotes just relations among persons," he writes, "becomes a means by which one loves God and neighbor."[122]

Gregory believes his Augustinian ethics of citizenship finds common cause with political theorists proposing versions of civic liberalism, which is "a virtue-oriented liberalism that aims to avoid individualistic and rationalistic assumptions about human nature as well as romantic or totalitarian conceptions of political community."[123] Like them, he sees the activity of politics as concerned with more than simply adjudicating the rival interests of a diverse citizenry (liberalism) and less than the construction of a

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[119] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 21.

[120] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 22.

[121] Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gustavo Gutíerrez are the two paradigmatic Augustinian civic liberals in Gregory's account, centering, as they do, love in their respective political visions. See Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 188–196.

[122] Gregory, "Strange Fruit," 104.

[123] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 10.

political community directed to a shared conception of the common good (communitarianism). Politics, rather, is concerned with the participation of citizens in self-government so as to cultivate civic virtue and forge civic friendships. This kind of civic liberalism sees pluralism as a gift rather than a burden, for difference occasions the possibility of friendship and shared life across difference. Augustine, Gregory writes, "always encourages the view of 'others' as potential friends rather than as threats to one's self or private community."[124] In terms of the relationship between difference and political community, then, Gregory's Augustinian civic liberalism advocates a minimalist, pluralist conception of republican national community that does not seek to reconcile or transcend difference but preserve it. Indeed, to transcend pluralism would mean eviscerating the very conditions of *ascesis* and civic virtue. The political community, for him, is not tasked with facilitating the moral perfection of citizens; citizens, rather, pursue their own self-perfection through engagements with fellow citizens. And Christians seek their perfection in charity by receiving their diverse neighbors as sacramental means of divine grace for the ordering of their loves.[125] In the end, for both Gregory and Mathewes, liberal politics is theologically meaningful insofar as it embodies a "sacramental pluralism" wherein one is transformed in grace, undergoes ascetical preparation for communion with God, and orders one's loves through encounter, negotiation, and forming a shared life with one's diverse neighbors.

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[124] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 350.

[125] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 349.

3.4. Conflicts of Democracy: Configuring Political Community and Difference

Augustinian civic liberalism, in my view, offers a significant advance in Christian political theological thinking about difference. With its sacramental political ontology and ethics of citizenship, it rightly sees pluralism and difference as generative of flourishing political life and key to virtuous Christian engagement. Rather than transcending difference in order to politically realize a particular vision of the good, it approaches difference with patient endurance, suffering its otherness for moral transformation. Nevertheless, it is exactly because of the way Augustinian civic liberalism thematizes pluralism and difference in sacramental terms that two critical problems still linger within its political theological vision. First, it is unable to articulate a vision of political community radical and robust enough to address the challenge of neoliberal capitalism, whose disastrous effects on political life undermine the very conditions of political engagement and self-rule it prizes. In other words, civic liberalism refuses to directly challenge neoliberalism, and its reluctance toward political collectivity renders it unable to offer substantive prescriptive and normative visions of social justice and flourishing. Second, Augustinian civic liberalism's vibrant sacramental ontology seems to render conflict either absent or only indexed to sin.

In order to elaborate these two problematics, consider a critique of Augustinian civic liberalism made by Geoffrey Holsclaw.[126] Though Holsclaw's challenge is issued to Gregory, it applies equally to Mathewes, as well: "The recovery of love as a political category by emphasizing properly 'ordered love' leaves one question hanging, which

[126] Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects*, 150–151.

Gregory never answers. How exactly is love ordered?"[127] In Gregory and Mathewes' ascetics and ethics of citizenship, there is remarkably little attention given to concrete explanations of how the ascetical ordering of love and desire occurs, how "the self undergoes such formation," and how the actual realities of public life are related to these formations.[128] Augustinian civic liberalism focuses "on *ordered* love to the neglect of the process of *ordering* this love," Holsclaw argues.[129] Holsclaw sees this as an oversight in Gregory's project. But in my view, this is not exactly right. The neglect of specificity as to the transformations of self and society, and Gregory and Mathewes's open-endedness, flexibility, and seeming ambivalence to the actual *content* of politics, is *intended*, not accidental. It is exactly what makes their Augustinian civic liberalism both *Augustinian* (relative indifference to the outcomes of political action) and *liberal* (aspiring toward a political and epistemic humility exactly where critics like Holsclaw desire moral specificity and political program). In other words, I take this neglect of specificity of social transformation to be not a failure of Augustinian civic liberalism but a manifestation of the limits of political theologies still committed to liberalism.

Insofar as Gregory and Mathewes remain committed to liberal politics, their theologies of citizenship remain primarily formal, eschewing prescription and normative theorizing about the ultimate ends of political life. Christopher Insole, who has offered the most sophisticated theological defense of political liberalism to date, defines liberalism in just this way: "[T]he conviction that politics is ordered towards peaceful

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[127] Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects*, 150.

[128] Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects*, 150.

[129] Holsclaw, *Transcending Subjects*, 151.

coexistence (the absence of conflict), and the preservation of the liberties of the individual within a pluralistic and tolerant framework, rather than by a search for truth (religious or otherwise), perfection, and unity."[130] According to Insole, liberal politics is by definition a form of politics that prioritizes the individual over the political community, aims toward minimal forms of peace and justice rather than a common good, and seeks to transcend conflicts between values and beliefs rather than facilitate them. While Augustinian civic liberals do well to save aspects of liberal politics by supplementing it with an account of civic virtue, they fail to address a central limitation of liberalism—namely, the lack of substantial forms of political community and collectivity able to contest neoliberalism's disintegration of the political. They construe an elegant account of pluralism and difference in terms of the sacramental vibrancy of creation, but failing to locate this account of pluralism and difference within a vision of just political community or anticapitalist struggle, their theological politics appears naively bourgeois, a positive theological interpretation of neoliberal fragmentation.

This returns us to the two basic problematic features of Augustinian civic liberalism's conception of political difference. First, it still conceives of political community and difference in oppositional terms. For Augustinian civic liberals, the dangers of political collectivism and its erasure of difference inhibit the imagining of a more expansive and robust vision of political community. To be sure, Augustinian civic liberals are justified in their anxieties about postliberal erasures of difference in what

[130] Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defense of Political Liberalism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 5.

Peter Dula calls the "rush to community."[131] My examination of Milbank above showed that these anxieties have a real basis in postliberal thought. But Augustinian civic liberalism's sacramental pluralism nearly mirrors the unqualified affirmation of pure difference advocated by the differential ontologies Milbank rightly criticizes for being overly individualist, atomizing, and reflective of neoliberal currents. An opposition between difference and political community still obtains.

Second, and relatedly, Augustinian civic liberalism's sacramental pluralism obscures the conflictual nature of political negotiations of difference. It is not surprising, given the way Augustinian civic liberals ground their practical politics in a vibrant, graced sacramental ontology, that a primary metaphor Mathewes employs to speak about engagement in pluralist politics is "play."[132] Because Christian engagement in liberal pluralist politics is governed by a fundamentally eschatological set of commitments, issuing in a form of republican citizenship best described as "ambivalent" fidelity,[133] the political field is construed in terms of "playfulness." That is, set free from illusions that politics is a zero-sum competition of struggle, Christians may pursue politics seriously but not desperately, committed more to the gift of playful exchange amidst difference and the transformative experience of engaging otherness than to securing the ends of a particular political program. In Augustinian fashion, political engagement is ordered more to transformation of the self than social transformation, and this comes through

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[131] See Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33–56.

[132] See, for instance, Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life*, 192; 285–299; 305–306.

[133] Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 243.

patient endurance of difference in the pluralist public sphere, negotiating a common life with others across difference. In effect, the principal civic virtue is tolerance.

While this politics of playfulness rightly questions the absolutist claims of earthly citizenship, it ultimately fails as a political practice on two fronts. First, as noted above, it is fundamentally elitist and bourgeois, evacuating politics of struggle, power, and antagonism. Its picture of political engagement is the urban liberal's leisure activities of civic dialogues and public forums rather than the political struggle of ordinary working-class and poor populations whose lives and well-being depend on the outcomes of political action. Augustinian civic liberalism, in other words, cannot give a compelling account of politics as *struggle* because of its inability to seriously thematize conflict. There is nothing, it seems, fundamentally at stake in the politics of the *saeculum*,[134] and so conflict in politics is seen as a sign of bad faith or too great attachment to the earthly city. Conflict, in other words, is either overlooked or identified with sin.[135]

Second, and relatedly, Augustinian civic liberalism's sacramental pluralism emphasizes flexibility, receptivity, and openness in political engagement to the neglect of correlative virtues and skills of confidence, agitation, persuasion, and assertion. Its political orientation of *confessio* lacks a sufficient assessment of politics as contestational and conflictual. Emphasizing only the act of expression or witness and not also the activities of persuading one's opponents or challenging political adversaries, Augustinian

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[134] On this, see Tran, "Assessing the Augustinian Democrats," 534–538.

[135] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 21. Interestingly, however, Gregory does, at one point, seem to admit a kind of conflict that belongs to creatures by nature: "Augustinians think human beings are best understood as bundles of loves. Mortal creatures are lovers constituted by loving, and being loved by, others and God. These primordial relations are neither essentially conflictual nor simply aggregate, foreclosing any possibility of a peaceful intersubjective social ontology" (Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 21). It is unclear what exactly he means by this, however, and Gregory does not pursue this line of thought any further to provide clarity.

civic liberalism's approach to political activity in terms of self-cultivation of civic virtue downplays the extent to which politics is about winning campaigns, pressuring public officials to act, and changing others' minds.[136] Mathewes and Gregory focus almost exclusively on the ascetical conversions of the *self* but not the conversions of *others*. Both are crucial to a vibrant democratic politics of genuine contention and debate. Rendering political negotiations of difference in terms of mutual struggle for the conversion of both oneself and others means more attention must be paid to conflict. As persons and communities struggle to re-order their loves and the loves of their neighbors, civic officials, and enemies, conflict will necessarily ensue. But a political practice in which various parties struggle for the conversion of others, even while opening themselves to conversion, is a politics more conducive to flourishing political community. Just as difference and political community must not be seen in oppositional terms, neither should conflict and community. Rightly pursued, conflict can be generative of mutuality and solidarity, for it allows difference space and voice in political negotiation. Constellating this relationship between conflict, difference, and political community in non-oppositional terms will be the task of the following chapters. For now, I only highlight the limits of Augustinian civic liberalism's conceptualization of pluralist politics in sacramental terms. Thematizing negotiation with difference in terms of receptivity to divine grace without an attendant account of conflict and adversarial

[136] For instance, Mathewes writes of the goals of public discourse, rendered in terms of confession: "Faith, expressed publicly and nondefensively, tries as best as possible to be honest about its origins, confessing the contingent and fragile path whereby we got to where we are. This honesty may, one hopes, provoke others to recognize the contingent and hence fragile character of their own beliefs and lead to a more civilized dialogue. But such political consequences are not to be counted on; we should do this rather for the way it makes us more humble about our own situation. Honest assessment of one's beliefs can make one aware of the deep precariousness of some of those beliefs" (Mathewes, "Republican Citizenship," 238–239).

disputation evacuates politics of the necessary tensions and antagonisms integral to vibrant democratic life.

4. Conclusion: Politics and Difference Beyond Augustine

My treatments of both postliberal Augustinianism and Augustinian civic liberalism have concluded in roughly the same place: both share an oppositional account of the relationship between political community and difference and a perspective on conflict which sees it as fundamentally threatening to either one or the other. The paradox of contemporary democratic politics consists in the felt need to develop forms of political community and collectivity while acknowledging increasing pluralization and growing polarization and disagreement. Conflict, in other words, has now become an inevitable reality of securing a common political life amidst pluralism and difference. Yet political theologians still view democratic conflict in primarily negative terms, seeking to alleviate the pressures of conflictual pluralist politics by appeal either to postliberal conceptions of political community wherein difference is subjugated, managed, and ordered, or to liberal notions of civic virtue and friendship wherein difference is patiently endured in forbearance. Given that democratic conflict is now an ineluctable fact of democratic political life, even as the need for robust forms of political community to challenge neoliberal order is evermore clear, a new and more nuanced theological approach to democratic conflict is needed. This requires also a new construal of the relationship between political community and difference that will allow conflict to be appreciated as integral to political community, rather than threatening it. In the following chapters, I seek to move beyond the limitations identified here and develop an account of political community and difference in these non-oppositional terms. I will argue that difference

need not be hierarchically ordered in harmony nor patiently endured but *conflictually engaged* in agonistic practice so as to generate shared democratic judgment.

Both forms of Augustinianism share a negative evaluation of and reluctance toward conflict. This, I have shown, is grounded in theological commitments about God and creation: an analogical framing of divine and creaturely sociality and a sacramental understanding of creaturely diversity as manifesting divine grace. In both, conflict is seen as a disordering of creaturely goodness and thus indexed to sin. For both Augustinians, the goodness of creation consists in harmonic relations amidst difference and so conflict appears as alien to and parasitic upon a more fundamental peace belonging to creaturely difference. Yet it is far from clear, I wish to suggest, that conflict, or at least all forms of conflict, should be seen in this way. To view conflict as entirely negative and a manifestation of sin is theologically ungrounded. It may be that such a strong theological aversion to conflict is, in reality, the *greatest* influence Augustine exercises upon contemporary political theology. It was Augustine, after all, along with Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas, whose theological aesthetics of harmony so profoundly captured the Western Christian imagination, even and perhaps especially when it comes to imagining political life. Augustine's Neoplatonic articulation of beauty as governed by the criteria of unity, proportion, and order has generated a fundamental anxiety about conflict, discord, and dissonance that finds profound correlates in political theory and theology.[137] Conflict is perceived, in Augustine's vision, as an intrusion, disordering, and disruption of creation's ontology of peace. It is my hunch that an aesthetics of harmony

[137] See Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 93–94. For the best treatment of Augustine's aesthetics, see Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

that displaces conflict is attributable more to Augustine's Neoplatonic inclinations than anything properly belonging to the theological grammar of the Christian tradition. Indeed, in the following chapters I will avail myself of resources within this tradition, particularly regarding the doctrine of creation, in order to develop a more theologically nuanced account of conflict. Rather than indexed to sin, I will show how conflict, at least in certain forms, is an aspect of creaturely goodness, productive and generative of creaturely sociality rather than threatening to it. In order to develop a positive theological construal of conflict, however, I first turn to a movement in contemporary political theory that has also sought a more positive account of conflict: agonistic theory or radical democracy.

CHAPTER THREE

Radical Democracy and Agonistic Theology

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined two ways contemporary political theology interprets and conceptualizes the theological meaning of conflict. I suggested that, despite their elegant articulations of political ontology and the social nature of human creatures, both Augustinian postliberals and Augustinian civic liberals share a decidedly negative view of conflict. This is due, in part, to how each construes the relationship of political community and difference in oppositional terms. That is, they value either the coherence of political community or the pluralism of difference as determinative and then interpret the other in light of this fundamental commitment. My purpose in sketching these tendencies in contemporary political theology was both to identify the need for a non-oppositional account of political community and difference that appreciates the positive and generative place of conflict in political life, as well as to problematize the analogical frame such thinking about divine and creaturely sociality represents, eclipsing, as it does, important features of human creatureliness like finitude, contingency, and embodiment.

In the following chapters I pursue an account of conflict, difference, and political community along these lines. In the present chapter, I approach these themes from a political theoretical standpoint, making use of the insights of agonistic theorists and radical democrats to explicate the essential place of conflict in democratic politics and the importance of agonistic pluralism for flourishing democracy. In chapters four and five I move from a political theoretical standpoint to a decidedly theological one, making a case

for the goodness of conflict within a doctrine of creation and fundamental theological anthropology. In other words, in this chapter I seek to sketch *how* it is that conflict amidst difference can be constitutive of vibrant, dynamic, and radically democratic community; in the next two chapters, I sketch *why* this is the case theologically, given our constitution as finite, contingent, and embodied creatures.

The present chapter proceeds in two parts. In the first, I outline and analyze the important insights of agonistic democratic theory, as put forward by two of its chief expositors: William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe. My concern in this section has less to do with differences between Connolly and Mouffe, though there are several important ones, and more with the central insights they share: that antagonisms are fundamental to social life; that conflict is an ineliminable feature of democracy and a fundamental source of its vitality; and that the aim of democratic politics is not to transcend these conflicts in agreement or consensus but to tend conflictual, agonistic relations amidst difference. A central concern of the chapter, alongside explicating the generative nature of democratic conflict, will be to raise the question of "political community" in agonistic theory, a term both Connolly and Mouffe tend to eschew. I suggest their doing so reveals the extent to which they, like the theologians considered in the previous chapter, remain captive to a picture of the relationship between political community and difference that trades in oppositional terms. Reacting to totalizing accounts of political community developed by communitarian theorists of the 1970s and 80s, agonists pursue more modest political formations of fugitive collectivity and assemblage. But while agonists are right to reject communitarian conceptions of unitary community, I suggest their abandonment of community as such undermines their aspirations for radical political transformation and a

truly *conflictual* democracy. I thus propose an account of "agonistic community" which, I believe, is in keeping with agonists' best insights, even as it tries to push them in a more collectivist direction.

In the second and much shorter part of the chapter I evaluate a strand of contemporary political theology that has appropriated the insights of agonistic theory—namely, the radical political theology of Jeffrey Robbins, Clayton Crockett, and Catherine Keller. While these thinkers are right to see in agonistic theory valuable resources for thinking theologically about the politics of difference, I question the theological revisions they make in advancing agonistic theory for theological purposes. These theologians argue an embrace of agonistic conceptions of the political and radically democratic multiplicity are incompatible with traditional notions of divine transcendence, sovereignty, and monotheism and so abandon the latter. One cannot theorize the political as sufficiently agonistic, they contend, unless one repudiates the sovereign One who stands over creation as its monarchical source of unity and order. Thus, these theologians conceptualize the agonistic political within a theology of pure immanence, embracing the death of God as the birth of radical democracy. I argue that such theorizing falls prey to the same pitfalls as the political theologies of sovereignty it denounces. Radical political theology, like postliberal Augustinianism and Augustinian civic liberalism, remains committed to an analogical conception of creaturely and divine sociality which does not sufficiently attend to the dissimilar features of creaturehood. While the political theologians examined in chapter two move from doctrines of the sociality of the Triune life to normative accounts of creaturely politics, the radical theologians I consider here simply reverse the script, revising conceptions of divinity in

light of the exigencies of democratic life. I conclude the chapter, then, by gesturing toward the need for a politics of *creatureliness* that more adequately accounts for the disanalogies between God and creatures.

2. Agonistic Democracy and The Politics of Difference

Agonistic or radical democratic theory has emerged within what Stephen K. White has called the "ontological turn" in contemporary political theory.[1] "Ontopolitics," as it is sometimes called, seeks to uncover the ways political theorizing, even the most secular and procedural, rests upon and presumes certain ontological commitments and imaginings.[2] As William Connolly puts it, "[E]very political interpretation invokes a set of fundamentals about necessity and possibilities of human being, about, for instance, the forms into which humans may be composed and the possible relations humans can establish with nature."[3] In light of this inescapably ontological character of political theorizing, agonistic theory attempts to articulate visions of the political in light of fundamental features of human being and action. But whereas traditional Western political philosophy has sought to ground normative political frameworks in static and hierarchical accounts of human nature, agonistic theorists turn to figures like Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault, and Deleuze to foreground the vicissitudes, vitalities, and antagonisms basic to human life and action, thus construing the political as a field of multiplicity,

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[1] Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3–17.

[2] On the notion of the "ontopolitical," see William E. Connolly, "Foreword: The Left and Ontopolitics," in *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), ix–xvii.

[3] William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1.

conflict, and flux. In short, to use the categories of the previous chapter, agonistic theory develops an ontology of difference as the basis of a radically pluralist politics. In this section I chart the movement of agonistic theory's political analysis—from a social ontology of antagonism, to a politics of agonism, to a consideration of the possibility of political community—in order to identify the generative possibilities of conflict and its centrality to flourishing democracy.

2.1. Antagonism: Conflict and Social Ontology

Agonistic theory's turn to the ontopolitical comes as a direct challenge to liberal political theory, both its professed transcendence of ontology (for instance, in John Rawls' "political, not metaphysical" account of justice[4] or Richard Rorty's postmetaphysical liberalism[5]), as well as its implicit asocial ontology of the rational, self-constituted individual who consents to social and political relation and authority. While agonists accept the genuine gains of liberal political order—constitutionalism, civil rights, religious toleration, etc.—they nevertheless fault liberal theory, particularly its neo-Kantian articulation in figures like Rawls, for presuming an account of the self and identity as constituted prior to and independently of social relations.[6] Selfhood and identity, agonists maintain, are produced and defined within social matrices and relations of power. Yet agonism diverges also from similar communitarian critiques of liberalism

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[4] John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 223–251.

[5] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[6] Chantal Mouffe, "American Liberalism and its Communitarian Critics," trans. William Falcetano, in *The Return of the Political* (New York: Verso, 2005), 29, 33. On agonism's continuities and discontinuities with liberalism, see White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 151–152.

in that it rejects also notions of unified communal identity, coherence, and order, as well as the substantial conceptions of the common good which define and maintain them. Agonistic theory asserts its vision of the political as a way beyond liberalism and communitarianism, reconfiguring notions of both self and society in more dynamic and conflictual ways.

Agonism's account of the political is grounded in a social ontology that centers antagonism and conflict as basic, fundamental features of being. For Connolly, who weaves together a fundamental ontology with resources culled from Nietzsche, Deleuze, Foucault, Whitehead, and others, being itself is multiplicitous and plural.[7] Analogous to William James's "pluralist universe," Connolly's world of becoming is marked by difference and flux at the most fundamental level, comprised of "diverse beings and forces following trajectories of their own" which exceed form, order, and fixed identity.[8] The world, for Connolly, possesses no inherent static order or meaning but is instead eternally unfolding and generating newness, inviting and resisting interpretations of its structure and normative dimensions, yet always exceeding definition.[9] Importantly, for Connolly, like Nietzsche, existence's fundamentally conflictual and pluralist nature comes from an abundance and excess of being and vitality, not a lack or distortion.

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[7] For Connolly's ontology of becoming, see William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[8] William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6. Connolly's reading of the book of Job in the book's prelude articulates this ontology in wonderfully poetic and mythical terms.

[9] See chapter 3, "Pluralism and the Universe," in William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 68–92.

Connolly's is not, then, an "ontology of violence" but an ontology of *extravagance*.[10] For this reason he describes his ontology as "post-Nietzschean," for it "draws sustenance from an almost always operative attachment to life as a protean set of energies and possibilities exceeding the terms of any identity or cultural horizon into which it is set."[11] Being is characterized most fundamentally by proliferation of difference, exceeding any claims to stable identity.

Yet even alongside this celebration of fundamental instability and disorder, Connolly acknowledges the inevitable necessity of identity. Agonistic theory, he asserts, "affirms the indispensability of identity to life," even as it also seeks to disturb and interrogate the "dogmatization of identity."[12] Identity and difference are, in fact, mutually constitutive: "difference requires identity and identity requires difference."[13] The "consolidation of identity" comes by way of the "constitution of difference,"[14] a paradox which makes impossible both the affirmation of difference's total alterity and the construction of sovereign identity. For Connolly, the problem of identity and difference is not that identity needs difference as its constitutive other, but rather the dogmatic unwillingness to acknowledge identity's contingency and the rendering of difference in terms of moral deviance. The history of Western political philosophy, especially since

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[10] For an agonistic reading of Nietzsche along these lines, see Romand Coles, "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity: Neo-Nietzschean Reflections on the Ethics and Politics of Coalition," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 2 (1996): 375–388.

[11] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 28.

[12] William E. Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), x.

[13] Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, ix.

[14] Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 9.

Augustine, reveals this troubling orientation toward difference, he argues. Identities, when proximate to power, become established as reflecting a necessary and intrinsic moral order. Difference is then interpreted as a deviation from this moral order and thus perceived as threatening, transgressive, and perverse. Once otherness is rendered in moral terms as evil, violence is a near necessary consequence. Connolly refers to this sequence of stabilizing identity through the moral scapegoating, policing, subjection, and governance of difference as the "Augustinian Imperative."[15] Once rendered morally deviant, difference can either be punished and coerced, like Augustine's Donatists, paternalistically endured, like minority recipients of liberal tolerance, or marginalized and excluded, like those who fail to meet the criteria of secular public reason. In each instance, political authority is aligned with hegemonic identity and difference is de-politicized and pushed outside the boundaries of the political.

Connolly's response to this problematic, however, is not to relativize identity but to recognize its contingency, flux, dependence, and conflictual embeddedness in other identity forms. If identity always entails a negotiation with difference—a micropolitics at the most elemental level—then it must be recognized that every configuration of identity could have been otherwise. This contingency, Connolly believes, should generate an appreciation of difference as the very condition of identity at all, its constitutive other. But not only is every identity, subjectivity, and self constituted by its others, Connolly maintains these constitutive relations are fundamentally *conflictual* ones. As he says, "To establish an identity is to create social and conceptual space for it to be in ways that

[15] William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993). See also Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 102–104.

impinge on the spaces available to other possibilities."[16] Conflict, thus, is inscribed into the fabric of being itself, a necessary corollary to the contingencies of identity and difference. The modality in which identities are construed is imbued with power, and the public manifestation of identity and its rendering of difference involves a negotiation of, and contestation over, social and political space. If it is the case that no identities are "natural," reflective of inherent meanings in the world, then every claim to identity and attempt to establish it involves power.[17] Collective identities especially, whether of nations, religious communities, social groups, etc., are achieved and maintained through consolidations of individual identities and exclusions of difference. But Connolly does not lament power itself, which is an ineliminable element of social life. Rather, his point is to expose power's operations, subject them to scrutiny, and criticize its uses to subjugate, police, and harm difference rather than facilitate its flourishing. Power, rather than being deployed to stabilize unruly collectivities, must be directed toward the proliferation of pluralism's constituent identities. This "pluralization of pluralism"[18] is doubtless a conflictual enterprise, involving networks of identities in confrontation and contestation with each other, negotiating the same symbolic, cultural, social, and political space, as we will see below in considering Connolly's democratic ethics. But such a conflictual political sphere is simply a manifestation of the antagonistic negotiations of identity and difference basic to being in the world.

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[16] Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 160.

[17] Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 66.

[18] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xix–xxiv.

Chantal Mouffe develops a similar political ontology of conflict, though by different conceptual means. While Connolly accounts for the world's fundamental antagonisms with the resources of post-structuralism, process philosophies, and continental philosophies of difference, Mouffe privileges Marxian and post-Marxian political theory, Gramscian analysis, and the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein. Her ontopolitical vision begins with an invocation of Carl Schmitt's distinction between "politics" and "the political."[19] The latter, for Schmitt and Mouffe, is that sphere of social life marked by antagonism and conflict which precedes the activities of "politics" (establishing order, organizing society, negotiating rival claims, etc.). Schmitt infamously developed the "friend-enemy" distinction to characterize the political as a field of antagonism between a pre-politically defined "people" and its outside.[20] This relation, inherent to any political formation, is marked by a necessary enmity and opposition, according to Schmitt, and the task of politics is to defend the interests and identity of a people. For Mouffe, however, the idea of a unified pre-political "people" is myth. Rather, the political is characterized by antagonisms of plurality and multiplicity, the constitution of identity through acts of power and differentiation, which "determines our very ontological condition."[21] Mouffe turns Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction on its head. Rather than designate a clear pre-political entity which the activity of politics seeks to maintain and defend, the friend-enemy distinction names the activity of politics itself,

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[19] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2009), 49–57. See also, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Verso, 1999). On this distinction in recent political theory, see James Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[20] See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[21] Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 2–3.

especially democratic politics, which involves the determination and construction of a *demos*, or people, a "we" to deliberate, judge, and act.[22] In other words, for Mouffe, while "the political" is characterized by an irreducible antagonism and multiplicity, the activity of "politics" entails the formation of a political entity capable of collective action. But because every formation of a political collective also involves the determination of who does *not* belong to the *demos*, the activity of politics is an inherently conflictual activity.[23] For Mouffe, conflict in democratic politics is ineliminable because conflict is written into the nature of social existence itself, which is a multiplicitous pluralism.[24]

2.2. Agonism: Radical Democracy and Pluralist Politics

Though ontology does not *determine* politics for agonists, their social ontology of conflict and antagonism frames the way they conceptualize the activity of politics, even as the experience and activity of politics also reshapes theorization about ontology. As Connolly points out, the relationship between ontology and politics is interactive and mutually dependent rather than unidirectionally causal.[25] For Mouffe, the goal of politics is to seek the conversion of antagonisms, which characterize the political, into relations of "agonism." Antagonism, she says, is conflict which occurs "between enemies, that is persons who have no common symbolic space," while agonism "involves a relation not

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[22] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 38–42.

[23] Recently, Mouffe has pursued this conflictual construction of the people as a form of "left populism," which she sees as a "discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy'," in an effort to revive participatory democracy from its post-democratic, neoliberal domestication. See Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018). For a similar, though more detailed, delineation of the differences between left, democratic populisms and right, authoritarian ones, see Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[24] Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 8.

[25] Connolly, "The Left and Ontopolitics," x.

between enemies but between adversaries," those who share a common symbolic space but disagree about how to organize it.[26] To see an enemy as an adversary means to perceive them not as an existential threat, someone to be obliterated or destroyed at all costs, but as an *opponent*, someone to contest and struggle with and against. It is important to appreciate the extent to which these agonistic relations preserve a tremendous degree of conflict, dispute, and discord, even as they seek to move beyond the antagonisms which can so easily terminate in violence. Agonistic adversaries are not naïve about the extent of their differences, imagining the other can simply be tolerated in a harmonious social coexistence or eventually converted to one's position. While these are not impossibilities in democratic encounters, neither are they the chief ends which democratic politics seek. Agonists are both suspicious of liberal tolerance and skeptical of the possibility of achieving full consensus and agreement amidst difference. They are generally wary of notions of civic friendship and liberal virtues of toleration and forbearance which, they believe, eclipse the extent to which various constituents in pluralist democracies desire radically divergent political ends and seek to realize them concretely. A fundamental tenet of agonistic politics is the ability to recognize *enemies*, even as it conceives of enemies not as threats but as fellow democratic contenders. In this, agonism perhaps shares more in common with New Testament teachings about enemy-love and the radical demands of charity in the face of opposition than it does liberal tolerance, which anxiously evades conflict within the political. Indeed, the recognition of another as an enemy should be seen as a form of respect and

[26] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 13.

acknowledgement. It is to appreciate the real difference of another without collapsing those differences into sameness, allowing another the integrity of her difference.

Agonistic adversaries are, then, democratic *enemies*. They pursue and aspire towards substantially different social and political visions and ends that cannot be harmonized without serious compromise or change. Yet an adversary is, as Mouffe says, "a *legitimate* enemy, one with whom we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. But we disagree concerning the meaning and implementation of those principles, and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion."[27] This tension between a common life based on shared political principles and the rupture of this common life by fundamental conflicts about the meaning of those principles is a fundamental insight of agonistic theory, one which I will take up and expand in the chapters that follow. The point of democratic politics in political societies marked by difference, agonists contend, is not necessarily to resolve disagreements nor to find compromise solutions to them. To be sure, a certain amount of consensus on fundamental democratic and constitutional principles is necessary for democracy to exist at all. But neither consensus nor compromise should be seen as ultimate goals of democratic politics or signs that its fundamental agonisms have been resolved or transcended. Rather, they should be seen as "temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation."[28] The real substance of agonistic democracy is not the resolution of adversarial conflict but conflict itself.

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[27] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 102.

[28] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 102.

We are now in a position to see a key feature of agonistic theory that distinguishes it from other traditions of political theory. Whereas much political theory, especially its liberal varieties, sees the aims of political authority, the state, and democratic activity to be the achievement of agreement, cohesion, and unity amidst difference, agonistic theory understands the primary role of politics to be the enabling, proliferating, and nurturing of conflict through democratic practices of disputation and contestation. Put differently, agonism does not accept a principal assumption of liberal theory—namely, that order and stability are preferable to disorder and unrest.[29] Because contention and conflict are signs of flourishing democratic life, and unity and consensus signs of its closure, agonists believe politics should be aimed at sustaining and nurturing these conflicts rather than transcending them. Liberalism, according to Mouffe, views conflict as fundamentally destructive rather than productive. Radical democratic politics instead seeks to perpetually stimulate and sustain conflict because of its productive and generative possibilities.

What are these possibilities? For agonists, the essential goodness of conflict is its capacity to expand the political—to pluralize pluralism and democratize democracy—a goal which it understands to be a good in itself. Democracy, in other words, is not an instrumental good, the most effective political form to realize certain policy goals or representative structures. Rather, democracy is an ever-expanding field of political activity, the space wherein persons contribute to the life of the *demos*, always reshaping and reforming it in more participatory directions. In this, agonism resembles a classical understanding of politics as a practice constitutive of human flourishing and so a good in

[29] A similar argument is made by Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

and of itself. It simply seeks to expand access to the political to those historically and presently denied membership in it. Conflict is both a sign of this expansion of the democratic field to include difference (e.g. agreements and beliefs previously taken for granted are now interrogated and challenged), as well as a mechanism of facilitating this expansion (e.g. the civil rights movement; class struggle aimed at deploying collective power against the domination of special interests). Because political regimes tend to reify and reinforce their structural forms and relations of power, resisting further democratization and reconfiguration, conflict is a critical means of contesting these configurations and reconstructing them to embrace difference.

Conflict then, in agonistic perspective, is not a marginal issue for political theory, a problem of modern pluralist societies to be solved. Too much modern political theory, and especially contemporary political theology, conceives of conflict in this way. Rather, conflict is a basic reality of political and social life and thus to be embraced. The eclipsing of conflict in political theory, argues Bonnie Honig, is an evasion of the heart of political activity itself, which involves the clashing and contestation of a plurality of actors, aspirations, and identities. Modern political theory, according to Honig, too often aims to settle conflicts, confine their expression, or preemptively resolve them.[30] This is the great paradox of modern political theory, she argues: its preeminent theorists seek to elucidate the necessary conditions for political regimes to overcome the need for real politics, resulting in a "displacement of politics" itself.[31] As she says,

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[30] Similarly, political theorist Sheldon Wolin speaks of "managed democracy." See Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[31] Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

> They confine politics (conceptually and territorially) to the juridical, administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, maintaining agreements, or consolidating communities and identities. They assume that the task of political theory is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over, and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangements of political conflict and instability.[32]

Thus, the success of a regime, in this view, "lies in the elimination…of dissonance, resistance, conflict, or struggle."[33]

The point of agonistic theory, conversely, is to reestablish the legitimate place of *politics* in the political order, to reclaim politics as a vital, contentious, and undomesticated set of activities aimed at rupturing stabilizations of power or identity and reconstituting the boundaries and composition of the *demos*. This vision of politics, exemplified by figures like Nietzsche and Arendt, Honig calls "*virtù* theory," to be contrasted with "virtue theories" of politics. The latter, exemplified by figures like Kant, Rawls, and Michael Sandel, "assume that the world and the self are not resistant to, but only enabled and completed by, their favored conceptions of order and subjectivity."[34] Virtue theories presume a harmonic relationship between political communities and the subjects which constitute them, devising principles, institutions, and forms of regime they believe able to fully accommodate all possible conflicts and difference, reconciling them within political society. Yet, Honig argues, in doing so and attempting "to stabilize themselves as the systematic expressions of virtue, justice, or the telos of community," they are driven "to conceal, deny, or subdue resistances to their regimes."[35] These

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[32] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 2.

[33] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 2.

[34] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 3.

[35] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 3.

resistances or "remainders" are, for *virtù* theorists, the source of politics' possibilities and promises. Following Arendt, Honig sees that "the inner multiplicity of the self" and "the plurality of the republic" exceed what every political formation can account for. "Both evidence space and belie, indeed, resist, systematization," she writes.[36] And while virtue theories seek control and domestication of these excesses, *virtù* theories advocate for their legitimate place in contesting political order. "It is for the sake of those perpetually generated remainders of politics," Honig writes, "that *virtù* theorists seek to secure the perpetuity of political contest."[37] Remainders signal the possibility that political order can be challenged, contested, and reconfigured, that it is not permanent. They are the outside to every stabilization of power and identity which threaten to undo them. Every judgement, determination, and action, even the most apparently consensual, produces and rests upon certain exclusions of difference, remainders which cannot be incorporated. But this is not to be lamented as a shortcoming or failure of democratic politics. It is exactly because of these exclusions that every democratic judgement, determination, and action remains open to contestation and revision. The remainders continually produced in democratic politics are the condition for democracy's vitality and dynamism.

This brings us to a crucial distinguishing feature of agonistic democracy from the liberalism it contends against, a feature most directly expounded by Mouffe. Whereas political liberalism is premised on the possibility of full rational consensus as both an ideal and a marker of democratic legitimacy, agonists like Mouffe embrace a form of decisionism. As Mouffe argues, rational consensus is the key notion shared by the two

[36] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 117.

[37] Honig, *Displacement of Politics*, 3.

major schools of contemporary liberal theory, represented by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.[38] Rawls' "overlapping consensus"—that which is shared between competing comprehensive doctrines in pluralist democracy and grounds a common understanding of justice—is the foundation of his account of liberal democracy and public reason.[39] While metaphysically anti-foundationalist, Rawls' liberalism nevertheless posits the notion of consensus as a pragmatic condition for the possibility of democratic legitimacy.[40] In other words, full rational consensus between reasonable persons concerning principles of justice and fairness is, for Rawls, that which gets democratic politics off the ground.

Habermas' proceduralist deliberative democracy instead conceives of rational consensus as something *achieved* through deliberation rather than presumed as a condition for democratic discourse.[41] For Habermas, it is not a set of shared, fundamental commitments that secures the consensus needed for democratic legitimacy. Rather, his attention is directed toward the institutions and procedural mechanisms within which deliberation occurs. Deliberation itself needs no foundation or shared basis of public rationality; but when deliberative procedures are ordered according to "ideal speech" scenarios, democratic deliberation can yield full consensus on a shared basis.[42] Thus,

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[38] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 83–90.

[39] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 133–172.

[40] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 1–38.

[41] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1993). See also, Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 67–94.

[42] Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhart and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), 43–115.

while he rejects Rawls's pragmatic foundationalism, Habermas yet retains a commitment to the ideal of full consensus and an optimism about the possibility of deliberative action in reaching it. For both Rawls and Habermas, consensus is the necessary condition of a democratic order's legitimacy and action.

For Mouffe, these notions of consensus are not only impossibilities but dangerous for democratic politics, even if held only as aspirations. "[T]he belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible," she argues, "is something that puts [democracy] at risk."[43] Consensus oriented accounts of democracy obscure the conflicts and remainders which endure in the face of every purportedly shared democratic act. Every deliberation, even the most consensual, finally terminates in a "*decision* which excludes other possibilities."[44] "[E]very consensus," Mouffe writes, "exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power," and thus "always entails some form of exclusion."[45] Hegemony, as opposed to consensus, is the operative notion here. Already in her 1985 work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe and her co-author Ernesto Laclau fronted this concept in their proposal for a pluralist, coalitional, and radically democratic left politics.[46] Inheriting the notion from Gramsci, Mouffe and Laclau understand hegemony to be the "articulation" and "political

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[43] Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 8.

[44] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 105.

[45] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 104. Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 104, likewise argues that the only kind of consensus available to democratic politics is an "ironic consensus" which acknowledges its contingency and contestability, making room for challenges to and reconfigurations of its formulations.

[46] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2014).

construction" of an acting subject amidst dissimilarity and difference.[47] The condition for this articulation is multiplicity, contingency, and undecidability, wherein "a *particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it."[48] Hegemony, then, is a part standing for the whole, even as it is unable to fully represent it. Some theorists view hegemony of this kind as a *failure* of politics to be truly representative, illegitimate insofar as it does not achieve full universality and comprehensiveness. But Mouffe and Laclau see hegemony as inevitable, unavoidable, and necessary given the simultaneous realities of multiplicity and need for collective expression and action. The precarities of political life demand decision, even as the conditions of pluralism problematize the ability of the decision to be universal and fully consensual. For this reason, Mouffe and Laclau refer to hegemony as "a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain."[49]

It is Mouffe's embrace of this notion of hegemony and her dismissal of the possibility of rational consensus that leads critics to accuse her of a kind of groundless decisionism, resembling Carl Schmitt's doctrine of the sovereign as "the one who decides," unaccountable to anything or anyone outside of himself.[50] To be sure, Mouffe's decisionism is one of the more controversial aspects of her thought. But critics are

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[47] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 75. See also, Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15–44.

[48] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, x.

[49] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xi.

[50] On this accusation and the difference between deliberative and decisionist democrats, see Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 1 (2007): 1–17. See also, Andrew Norris, "Cynicism, Skepticism, and the Politics of Truth," in *Truth and Democracy*, ed. A. Norris and J. Elkins (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 97–113.

mistaken to see this as endorsing unaccountable, capricious, and irrational rule. While the decisionism of Schmitt's sovereign indeed manifests in arbitrary, authoritarian rule, Mouffe's is instead embedded in a structure and practice of democratic accountability and responsibility. It is wrong then to equate her rejection of deliberative consensus and attention to the dimensions of undecidability involved in democratic politics with Schmitt's absolutism. While she doubtless retrieves and revises aspects of Schmitt's thinking, it is the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell that primarily shapes Mouffe's decisionism and contextualizes it within an ethical frame. For Wittgenstein and Cavell, certainty gives way to responsibility as the determinative factor in the veracity of claims of speech and action.[51] Since one can never speak or act on certain knowledge, safely appealing to universal principles and criteria for justification, one must assume *personal* responsibility for every act or claim. Similarly, for Mouffe, because consensus cannot secure absolute legitimization for judgment and action, those who bring deliberation to a decisive act must be responsible for that decision and, further, *responsive to* those the decision excludes. "[B]ringing a conversation to a close," she contends, "is always a personal choice, a *decision* which cannot be simply presented as mere application of procedures and justified as the only move that we could make in those circumstances."[52] Yet this "emphasis on the moment of *decision* and *responsibility* enables us," she writes, "to envisage democratic politics in a different way because it subverts the ever-present temptation in democratic societies to disguise existing forms of

[51] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 76.

[52] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 75.

exclusion under the veil of rationality or of morality."[53] Indeed, Mouffe accuses deliberative democrats, in their insistence on procedure, rules, and principles to secure rational consensus, of evading the demands of responsibility and accountability in decision-making.[54] By privileging the latter, Mouffe embeds her decisionism in an ongoing process of contestation, responsiveness, and revision. "By warning us against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated," she writes, agonistic democracy "forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive. To make room for dissent and to foster institutions in which it can be manifested is vital for a pluralist democracy."[55] Correlative to Mouffe's decisionism, in other words, is an ethos of democratic responsiveness and accountability which sees every hegemony as provisional and contestable, open to reconstitution.[56]

To further delineate this ethical component of agonism, which, I am suggesting, is the necessary correlative to its decisionism, I return to Connolly, who devotes much energy to identifying and describing the virtues and practices necessary to sustain a radical and pluralist democracy. For Connolly, the two chief virtues for rendering democratic decision and action open to scrutiny, contestation, and revision are, as he terms them, "agonistic respect" and "critical responsiveness."[57] These agonistic virtues

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[53] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 76.

[54] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 105.

[55] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 105. As Mouffe puts it elsewhere, "[T]he belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible…is something that puts [democracy] at risk" (Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 8).

[56] From a theological standpoint, we might commend this affirmation of provisionality and contingency in democratic politics as a recognition of human finitude and fallenness.

[57] For a fuller, more detailed, and practical elaboration of radical democratic virtues, sensibilities, and practices, see Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*

frame and structure the conflict of agonistic democracy in order to transcend simple antagonistic clashing and yield new expansions of the political, generate revisions of judgments and decisions, and render political action contingent and alterable. By "agonistic respect," Connolly refers to one's relationship to different constituencies with whom one shares a political world. It involves a recognition of the constitutive role of those different others in one's identity, and thus also an acknowledgment of the contingency and contestability of one's identity and positions.[58] Rather than seeing difference as a threat, agonistic respect appreciates difference as the condition of possibility for one's own identity and action. Yet this affirmative posture toward difference is always also accompanied by tension and friction—respect is inflected by agonism. Agonistic respect is a relation of activity, contestation, and strife. "[P]artisans may test, challenge, and contest pertinent elements in the fundaments of the others," writes Connolly. "But each also appreciates the comparative contestability of its own fundaments to others."[59] Without a commitment of respect toward difference and its constitutive role in one's self-identity, agonism can tend toward resentment, scapegoating, or violence. But without an agonistic spirit, respect for difference can devolve into sentimentalism and distant paternalism. The key, as Connolly sees it, is for agonism and respect to mutually coinhere.

Agonistic respect is crucially different from liberal tolerance exactly in this insistence on contention and conflict. Whereas tolerance "is bestowed upon private

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(Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); and Roman Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[58] Connolly, *Identity|Difference*, 166–167.

[59] Connolly, *Pluralism*, 123.

minorities by a putative majority occupying the authoritative, public center," agonistic respect envisages a conflictual, pluralist center where constituents vie for space, even as no one constituency can claim authoritative control over that sphere.[60] Unlike tolerance, agonistic respect acknowledges the contestability of one's position while nevertheless engaging in a fiercely disputatious practice with others, a paradoxical exhibition of both confidence and humility, conviction and irony. In short, agonistic respect is a virtue of hope and risk. It names a disposition of vulnerability wherein one acknowledges the contestability of one's claims in order to truly enter into a dialogical negotiation with difference. One's conflictual and adversarial engagement with others is premised on the willingness to submit one's own claims to interrogation, challenge, and revision.[61] As Connolly puts it, "[Y]ou *absorb the agony* of having elements of your own faith called into question by others, and you *fold agonistic contestation* of others into the respect that you convey toward them."[62]

If agonistic respect concerns relations between contending identities that have a relative amount of recognition and power in society, critical responsiveness is the "ethical relation a privileged constituency establishes with culturally devalued constituencies striving to enact new identities."[63] Critical responsiveness involves those more dominant identities practicing "careful listening and presumptive generosity" to oppressed,

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[60] Connolly, *Pluralism*, 123.

[61] Indeed, Connolly imagines agonistic respect to entail more than simply allowing for criticism and contestation of oneself, but also actively invoking a sense of contingency in one's claims. "You might," he suggests, "adopt a stance in which your very assertions are compromised by gestures that call them into question, even for yourself. Or pursue genealogical investigations of the social and historical processes by which the ideal you prize has come into being" (Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 92).

[62] Connolly, *Pluralism*, 213–214.

[63] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 235 n.40.

marginal, or incipient identities emerging on the boundaries of the political or beneath the threshold of recognition.[64] As a democratic virtue, it is "anticipatory" of new identities, creating space for their emergence and aiding their self-cultivation and expression. Yet, importantly, responsiveness to difference is not a blind gesture; it is marked by a *critical* orientation. "[I]t does not always accede to everything that a new constituency or movement demands," Connolly reminds.[65] To lack this critical orientation would be to deprive democratic pluralism of its conflictual vitality. Critical responsiveness commits one to scrutinizing, criticizing, and, if necessary, rejecting new identities or movements which claim a kind of exclusive universality that demonizes and punishes others for their difference. It is for this reason that Connolly, so insistent on the affirmation of difference and suspicious of claims to exclusivity, is nevertheless unyielding in his criticism of fundamentalisms.[66]

Finally, while critical responsiveness is both open and critical, it is also self-revisionary. Insofar as "hegemonic identities depend on existing definitions of difference to be," writes Connolly, the recognition of difference entails also a revision of "your own terms of self-recognition as well."[67] This is because the emergence of new constituencies and identities within the political sphere entails moving "the self-recognition and relational standards of judgment endorsed by other constituencies" connected to them.[68]

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[64] Connolly, *Pluralism*, 126.

[65] Connolly, *Pluralism*, 127.

[66] For Connolly's argument for why fundamentalisms are incompatible with agonistic politics, see Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 105–133.

[67] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xvi.

[68] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xvi.

As the pluralist political is continually expanded, incorporating new constituencies, it is also always being reshaped and refashioned in its character and modes of recognizing and responding to difference. Connolly's term for this is the "pluralization of pluralism," something he takes to be a chief good of democratic politics. As Kristen Deede Johnson puts it, critical responsiveness is "the ethic that makes such pluralization possible."[69]As critical responsiveness engenders a receptivity toward new difference, the success of democratic politics is evaluated not so much by its ability to yield consensus as it is the intensity of its disturbances and reformulations.

Agonism thus posits its account of radical and pluralist democracy against both democracy's liberal and communitarian articulations, the former which demands consensus as the basis of democratic legitimacy and the latter which prioritizes collective unity of identity, rendering consensus-making relatively unnecessary. Agonism instead seeks to perpetuate and sustain democracy's conflicts so as to yield shared but contestable decisions that are responsive to dissent, accountable to the excluded, and open to continual revision and reformulation. Yet this emphasis on decision, responsibility, and accountability assumes a collective "we" who decides and bears responsibility for decision, raising the question of political *community*.

2.3. Community: Fugitivity, Assemblage, Societas

Agonistic theory establishes its vision of radical, conflictual democracy in wake of a comprehensive critique of liberal theory. Yet agonists are nevertheless reluctant to embrace substantive notions of political community as an alternative, such as those proposed by communitarian critics of liberalism like Charles Taylor and Michael

[69] Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 106.

Sandel.[70] While these communitarian articulations of political community, oriented toward a shared substantive vision of the common good, do well to challenge the atomization, individualism, and contractualism of liberal theory, agonists fear they eclipse the antagonisms of the political and ignore the legitimate advances of modern democratic pluralism and its embrace of difference. As Connolly writes, neither liberalism nor communitarianism "is good at characterizing how action in concert can be mobilized among a populace crisscrossed by multifarious lines of identity, difference, connection, indifference, and opposition."[71] In short, neither body of theory is particularly adept at thinking about the productive and generative capacities of conflicts amidst difference in pluralist politics.

We might call the question of defining how such "action in concert" can be achieved amidst pluralism the problem of *collectivity* in agonistic theory. How, amidst great difference and diversity, can people nevertheless act *together*? Who is the "we" which acts? Is it founded upon a shared identity? Experience? Legal status? Set of ultimate values? If not, what is the content of such collectivity and what shapes its configuration? The importance of articulating an account of collectivity, whether through notions of community or some other set of concepts, is that it names how political judgment and action can be *shared*. Absent some account of commonness across difference, persons and constituencies cannot act together. But just what commonness consists in is articulated differently by agonistic theorists. Here, I wish to dwell on the

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[70] See, for instance, Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers, vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[71] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xx.

various ways agonists conceive of democratic collectivity. In their refusal of both liberal and communitarian preferences for individualism or community respectively, and through their exploration of new ways to imagine collectivity, agonists offer a way beyond the liberal and postliberal debates in political theology examined in the previous chapter. Liberal and postliberal political theologies, I argued there, struggle to imagine conflict as a constitutive feature of political community. Agonists rightly recover conflict as an inherent and vital part of democratic politics, even if they yet eschew notions of political community as an ideal. I argue, while appreciating agonists' re-centering of conflict, their refusal of community leaves them unable to articulate a vision of collectivity strong enough to generate radical transformative collective action or sustain conflict over time. In other words, agonists, like their liberal and communitarian opponents, still figure community and difference in oppositional terms rather than mutually constitutive ones. After detailing this argument, I will gesture toward a conception of "agonistic community," or political community characterized *by* conflict, to be furthered developed in chapter five.

One approach to the problem of collectivity is to see something like "democratic community" as a real but fleeting possibility for democratic politics. Such an understanding is embodied in Sheldon Wolin's concept of "fugitive democracy."[72] For Wolin, fugitivity names the momentary and episodic eruption of authentic democratic self-rule, which is then almost immediately compromised by its structuring into governing forms and institutional arrangements. Democracy is a tumultuous, wild practice, resisting domestication and institutionalization. It needs, Wolin writes, to be

[72] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, ed. Nicholas Xenos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 100–113.

"reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives."[73] Fugitivity, in other words, is Wolin's way of conceptualizing democratic community as a revolutionary *event* rather than a political formation with continuity, stability, and permanence. As a moment of rupture, fugitive democracy is realized in shared, common action that incorporates difference. But this "commonality is," Wolin writes, "fugitive and impermanent. It is difference that is stable."[74] Rather than resting upon shared set of experiences, values, histories, or identities, fugitive democratic community is spontaneous and ephemeral, produced through negotiation and exchange rather than resting upon any pre-political reality. Because of this it is temporary and fleeting.

While it captures something important about the difficulty of sustaining vibrant, participatory democracy, Wolin's understanding of democratic collectivity as fugitive can be criticized on two fronts. First, it is unclear that such a definition of democratic community, with its emphasis on impermanence and transience, identifies anything truly *collective*, shared, or communal. Fugitive democracy, as episodic and spontaneous, cannot produce shared judgments and action over time, nor sustain the conflicts necessary to produce them. Fugitivity is fortuitous, unable to be anticipated. As such, it is unclear that fugitive democratic community can truly be *shared*. Second, Wolin's fugitive democracy tends to imagine the cessation of conflict and the stabilization of difference still as an ideal or horizon of possibility—the impossible possibility which

[73] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 111.

[74] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy, Difference, and Re-Cognition," in *Fugitive Democracy*, 412.

appears in moments of rupture. But such an unattainable ideal has the unfortunate effect of casting provisional, contingent judgments and actions as imperfect and deficient. Again, as Mouffe puts it, such a "belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible…is something that puts [democracy] at risk."[75] The paradox of fugitivity, then, is that it posits both a far too thin and fleeting conception of collectivity to be politically useful *and* an unrealizable standard of ideal collectivity which disincentivizes ordinary collective action.

If Wolin sees democratic collectivity as the imperfect and momentary realization of political community, Connolly represents an even more modest aim for collectivity, one which he speaks of in terms of "assemblage." Keenly aware of the dangers of community, Connolly criticizes political theories both ancient and modern which proffer accounts of political community founded on notions of shared identity. "The stronger the drive to the unified nation, the integrated community, and/or the normal individual," he writes, "the more powerful becomes the drive to convert differences into modes of otherness"[76] Connolly, more than most agonistic theorists, praises liberalism for its preservation of difference, opposition to substantial notions of the common good, and suspicion of collective forms of identity. Political community, as he sees it, always tends toward totalitarianism. Even the nuanced, pluralist conceptualizations of political community offered by civic liberalism fall under Connolly's censure. Though they espouse a communality of "harmonious difference," Connolly believes every harmonization necessitates forms of policing and coercion of difference to secure such

[75] Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 8.

[76] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xxi.

harmonization.[77] Civic liberalism presupposes a baseline civic identity beneath and more fundamental than the various particularities of political constituents, unifying them *despite* their differences. Connolly, instead, defends an account of collectivity not founded on shared identity, but assembled through multiple overlapping patterns of relation *across* difference.

The difference between civic liberalism's political community and Connolly's multiplicitous assemblages can be seen in Connolly's distinction between "arboreal" and "rhizomatic" pluralism, a set of images he draws from Deleuze and Guattari. The former "appreciate(s) diversity as limbs branching out from a common trunk," whether that be "Christianity or Kantian morality or the history of a unified nation or secular reason," or any other source of shared identity.[78] Connolly shares Deleuze and Guattari's stance toward this way of imagining the structure of plurality: "We're tired of trees…*They've made us suffer too much*."[79] Rhizomatic pluralism, on the other hand, is a multiplicity with no center, no lowest common denominator source of shared identity, and no fundamental "root." Rhizomatic pluralism is an endlessly unfolding network of connections between differences, sustained by "a general ethos of generosity and forbearance," which is itself sourced from multiple traditions.[80] In a rhizomatic pluralism, majority assemblages are able to form around particular issues in order to enable shared action. But unlike collective actions founded upon a "general consensus" or "coalition of

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[77] Connolly, *Identity|Difference*, 87–92.

[78] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 93.

[79] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 15, quoted in Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 94.

[80] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 94.

interests," these majority assemblages are provisional, "mobile constellation(s)" of actors which converge in a shared action, yet for many diverse reasons, motivations, self-interests, and ultimate goals.[81] The assemblage, in other words, is constituted by a plurality unified in action, provisionally, temporarily, and on no other basis than the action itself. The advantage of such assemblages, over against stabilized forms of political community, is that "they enable action in concert through the locality, the regional assembly, and the state without intensifying monistic pressures for the perversification of diversity built into the pursuit of the normal individual, the realized community, or the unified nation."[82]

The politics of community, Connolly argues, demands a political "we" that is dangerously exclusive and hegemonic. "You do not need a wide universal 'we' (a nation, a community, a singular practice of rationality, a particular monotheism)," he writes, "to foster democratic governance of a population," but rather "intersection and collaboration between multiple, interdependent constituencies infused by a general ethos of critical responsiveness drawn from several sources."[83] Unlike Mouffe, who sees the constitution and definition of a collective "we" to be a necessary and inevitable part of any democratic politics, Connolly aspires toward a more dispersed, fragmented, and *ad hoc* set of provisional governing alliances. The rhizomatic assemblage enables collective action without crystallizing collective identity.

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[81] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 95.

[82] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, 96.

[83] Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization*, xx.

However, as with Wolin's fugitive democracy, it is unclear whether Connolly's assemblages are capable of producing the kinds of collective, mutual relations necessary to make sustained judgements over time and fashion a common life to embody them. While they appear more substantial than liberal contractualism, relationships between constituencies in governing assemblages still exhibit an ironic distance and orientation of suspicion. They seem, in other words, incapable of demonstrating the substantial solidarity, mutuality, and forms of mutual attunement necessary for large-scale political action and organization over time. Can governing assemblages like the ones Connolly describes, for instance, seriously challenge and transform a capitalist economy, restructuring it along more just and humane lines? Anticapitalist politics of this kind consists not simply in a single collective action, however revolutionary, the convergence of multiple actors in shared "action in concert." Rather, it demands the creation and sustaining of a common life capable of producing just and equitable forms of practical decision-making, institutions, and forms of distribution. In the end, Connolly's agonism goes so far in contesting notions of shared identity, collectivity, and political community that he seems to undermine possibilities for radical and transformative collective action. As we noted with Milbank in the previous chapter, such a politics of difference without an attending account of solidarity and mutuality only substantiates the fragmenting and exploitative patterns of neoliberalism.

Among advocates of agonism, it is Mouffe who goes the furthest in defending substantial forms of collectivity. While still eschewing the language of political community, contending that its commitment to a singular conception of a substantive common good undermines the vital pluralism that fuels democratic politics, she

nevertheless acknowledges the need for robust forms of political identification and common action.[84] As she puts it, what is needed is "to conceive of a mode of political association, which, although it does not postulate the existence of a substantive common good, nevertheless implies the idea of commonality."[85] Commonality, rather than community, names the possibility of constructing collectivity amidst pluralism through political means.[86] Mouffe delineates this difference by appealing to Michael Oakeshott's distinction between *universitas* and *societas*. Whereas the former is founded upon the shared pursuit of a common purpose or substantive good, and thus more closely resembles communitarian notions of political community, the latter is a kind of association constituted by "formal relationship(s) in terms of rules."[87] Mouffe thematizes Oakeshott's concept of association in non-essentialist terms by appealing to Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy. What is shared in a *societas* is not anything *substantive* but "a 'grammar' of political conduct," a set of rules regarding speech, use of concepts, and identifications that inform political judgment and action.[88] This construal of association in terms of shared grammar, rather than, say, shared tradition, culture, concept of the good, etc., allows a plurality of particular understandings and uses of concepts and values, even conflict over the deployment of these concepts and values, while yet binding constituents together in a shared mode of speech. Recall that a shared

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[84] On Mouffe and the notion of political community, see Alessandra Tanesini, "In Search of Community: Mouffe, Wittgenstein, and Cavell," *Radical Philosophy* 110 (2001): 12–19.

[85] Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community," in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 108.

[86] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 55.

[87] Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship," 108.

[88] Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship," 108.

grammar is precisely what differentiates, in Mouffe's view, relations of agonism from antagonisms. Whereas the latter share "no common symbolic space," the former share a linguistic world but disagree about how to organize it.[89] What constituents in a *societas* share is not a substantive identity or vision of the common good but a "common recognition of a set of ethico-political values," such as liberty and equality, even as they disagree about their exact content and contours.[90] These values, Mouffe claims, configure citizens as members of a shared project of radical democracy, creating "chains of equivalence" among various democratic movements and struggles, and thus forms of commonness and solidarity between them. A radical democratic *societas* or association of this kind is a political community in the weak sense of the term, "without a definite shape or a definite identity and in continuous re-enactment."[91]

There is much to applaud in Mouffe's careful articulation of possibilities for commonality and collectivity in agonistic democracy. She pushes collectivity to a far more substantive end than Wolin and Connolly, even while retaining an agonistic appreciation for the conflicts and tensions which characterize and energize such collectivity. Nevertheless, forms of political association characterized simply by shared commitments to abstract and formalistic principles like liberty and equality, even articulated in radical democratic directions, are still inadequate to produce the relationships of solidarity and mutuality necessary for a radical and transformative politics. They lack the means to produce the specific moral determinations and judgments

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[89] Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 13.

[90] Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship," 111.

[91] Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship," 109.

needed, for instance, to restructure political economy in such a way as to enable participatory, radical democratic citizenship. My own account of agonistic politics will not intend to oppose agonism's pluralism with a politics of the common good. But if agonistic democracy wishes to pursue truly radical and transformative ends it must be open to substantial forms of collectivity capable of discovering and pursuing a plurality of shared, if penultimate, goods, and forging an enduring common life around the democratic negotiation of these goods. It needs a sense of political community.

My contention is that agonists are mistaken in jettisoning the concept of political community and that a reconstruction of political community consonant with agonism's basic insights—what I will call "agonistic community"—is both possible and necessary. On the one hand, Christians have distinctly theological motivations for retaining the language of community when speaking about political life. As the Augustinians considered in the previous chapter showed, human creatures are fundamentally social beings ordered to forms of communion and mutuality, and public life should be shaped to enable persons to flourish in these capacities.[92] I will delineate the theological dimensions of agonistic community in chapter five. Here, I simply wish to suggest that there are specifically *political* reasons for retaining the notion of community, and that agonists are wrong to align it simply with the erasure of pluralism and its subordination to a substantive conception of the common good.

[92] Some political theologians in the Augustinian tradition, like Luke Bretherton, prefer to speak of a politics of "common life," rather than political community. I see the delineation of political community in agonistic terms as roughly equivalent to what Bretherton calls a common life. See Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Agonistic theory's articulations of collectivity are highly provisional, occasional, and episodic, and, as such, they are unable to provide the means for radical and transformative political change. Momentary ruptures and insurgent contestations of hegemony, without the capacities to sustain common judgement and action over time, cannot issue in large-scale social transformation. Agonism's articulations of collectivity tend, ironically, toward a conservative acquiescence to status quo politics. But even more than this, absent a more substantial account of political community, agonism lacks the resources to contextualize the conflicts it prizes within an ongoing common life and network of mutual relations. Without a stronger sense of political community and solidarity, the ethical obligations to difference that agonists propound can only be construed in terms of benevolence or duty. But within a framework of political community, wherein the flourishing of self and community mutually cohere, constituents have a *material* interest in caring for difference, dissent, and the marginal. Within the context of political community, conflict can be approached not simply as a dynamic occurring between two or more groups but as a shared good of the political community to be negotiated democratically. Trust, reciprocity, solidarity, and other virtues of negotiating conflict are proper features of a political community, not provisional alliances gathered around convergent interests. These democratic virtues and the relations of mutuality shaped by them take time to emerge and depend on shared practices to sustain them. In short, without the characteristic goods of political community, conflict cannot be properly negotiated and structured toward its most generative ends. Rather than inhibit conflict, as certain post-pluralist, common good theories of political community might, an

agonistic conception of political community provides the social and political structures to sustain a conflictual politics.

What is not a necessary feature of political community, I am arguing, is a single substantive conception of the common good. Agonists' associations of political community with theories of the common good wrongly concludes that all political theories which speak of the common good are post-pluralist and that all forms of political community demand agreement concerning the common good. But the union of concepts of political community and the common good is not a necessary one, and numerous examples could be given which challenge both of the above presumptions. The account of agonistic community I propose in chapter five is shaped, in part, by Augustine's vision of political community, which is not founded upon an account of the common good but rather on the shared pursuit of a multiplicity of penultimate goods or *common objects of love*. As Augustine understands it, a political people is constituted not by a shared identity, culture, rationality, tradition, or set of procedures and rules, but by "common agreement on the objects of their love."[93] Such a definition of a political community is open to pluralist configurations, for those penultimate goods and objects of persons variegated loves are multiple, sometimes conflicting, and in constant need of right ordering. It is for this reason that Charles Mathewes sees much consonance between Augustine's political thought which privileges the place of love and desire and agonism's attention to conflict.[94] If human creatures' loves are multiple, overlapping, and

[93] Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), XIX.24.

[94] Charles T. Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony: Christian Political Participation Beyond Liberalism," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001): 125–150.

intersecting, then the political process of forging *common* loves will necessarily be one of conflict, conciliation, and conversion. As Mathewes contends, by situating politics within an account of common loves, "Christians can re-imagine politics as a conflict about loves, and the movement for 'agonistic democracy' can be seen as clarifying the possibility of re-interpreting politics as a struggle over peoples' loves."[95] Reconfiguring political community in agonistic terms as the common struggle to discover, forge, negotiate, and rightly order loves both preserves agonism's insights about the goodness of pluralism and the necessity of conflict, while also contextualizing these dynamics within an ongoing common life of trust and mutuality. Indeed, in the account of agonistic community I am suggesting and will develop further in chapter five, *charity* may be an appropriate description of the kind of relationships possible within a conflictual politics. If charity and conflict are not seen as opposing forms of relation, but entangled ones, then successful stagings of conflict might even facilitate relations of charity. In short, reconfiguring political community on the basis of love and conflict can both supply agonism with a more substantial account of collectivity and reveal how conflict is even more productive and generative than agonists themselves realize.[96] Working out the fabric of this kind of agonistic community will be the subject of chapter five.

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[95] Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony," 126.

[96] The notion of agonistic community I am proposing here has resemblances to certain returns to the notion of community in contemporary continental philosophy. Roberto Esposito, for example, has argued quite persuasively on both etymological and philosophical grounds for an account of *communitas* not in terms of territory, property, identity or "wider subjectivity," but gift, debt, and obligation. See Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also Roberto Esposito, "The Law of Community," in *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 14–26.

3. Agonistic Politics and Radical Political Theology

Thus far I have shown how agonistic political theory offers an alternative way of conceptualizing conflict and difference to the postliberal and civic liberal political theologies examined in chapter two. Agonism embraces conflict as a constituent feature of flourishing democratic life and offers a vision of politics ordered to the proliferation and nurturing of conflict and difference. In demonstrating the importance and generative possibilities of conflict, agonism can aid political theology in rethinking the meaning of pluralism, conflict, and difference in more constructive and appreciative terms.[97] Most political theologians are reluctant to embrace a conflictual account of the political. Yet one group of theorists has, in fact, already taken up agonistic theory as a principal interlocutor for political theology. Various advocates of "radical political theology"[98]—sometimes referred to also as theologies of immanence, process theologies, or theologies after the death of God—have made use of agonistic theory in order to push political theology beyond classical theological notions of transcendence, sovereignty, and oneness. I conclude this chapter by offering a critical appraisal of this theological reception of agonistic theory in order to show how it differs from the political theology of conflict I develop in the chapters to come.

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[97] I wish to note at this point that my own theological articulation of conflict and difference will diverge from agonism in substance but not its basic contentions. For instance, Connolly and Mouffe arrive at their embrace of conflict and difference primarily through a post-structuralist account of identity, which I deem insufficiently materialist. Instead, I approach the politics of conflict and difference through a consideration of theological anthropology and the doctrine of creation, which I see as more materialist and theological. Rather than approaching conflict as the clashing of identities and the negotiation of otherness, I consider conflict in terms of the pursuit of the shared goods by human creatures who are embodied, finite, and marked by contingency.

[98] I take this term from Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

The radical political theologians I have in mind represent various theological and philosophical backgrounds, interests, and constructive visions, yet converge in a shared aspiration to move political theology beyond those concepts traditionally used to justify political hierarchy, and propose instead, as Jeffrey Robbins terms it, a radically "democratic political theology."[99] Figures like Robbins, Catherine Keller, and Clayton Crockett, among others, see oppressive and hierarchical social, political, and economic orders as rooted in classical notions of divinity: transcendence, sovereignty, and oneness. Following a mode of analysis set forth first by Carl Schmitt, they agree that the most significant concepts that have shaped modern political life are secularized theological ones. For instance, just as the transcendent God stands above and outside of creation and its laws, so the political sovereign is imagined as standing above political society and outside of law, being the source and foundation of both.[100] Such a view of transcendence is directly opposed, radical political theologians argue, to a democratic politics which finds its basis of legitimation not in transcendent authority but in the immanent power of the multitude. Tocqueville wrote of this paradox of democracy and transcendence with extraordinary prescience when he observed, "The people reign over the American political world like God over the universe."[101] For Tocqueville, democracy replaces God as the transcendent source of authority with the sovereign will of the people. Robbins takes Tocqueville's observation to its radical conclusion, arguing that it is only with the death of a transcendent God that the birth of true democracy is possible. "[S]o long as our

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[99] Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

[100] Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 108.

[101] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (New York: Penguin, 2003), 71, quoted in Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 24.

political theology is reliant on the element of transcendence," he writes, "we are not yet, nor can we ever be said to be, living in a democratic age."[102] Thus, instead of a political theology of transcendence that identifies the political sovereign with divinity, he proposes an "immanent form of political theology predicated on the constituent power of the multitude."[103]

Moreover, the death of the transcendent God is also, for radical political theologians, the death of the *sovereign* God. As Crocket puts it, "One way of to understand the death of God is as the need to think God as other than sovereign."[104] Indeed, sovereignty, even more than transcendence and oneness, though all three are indissolubly bound together, has been the cornerstone of modern political thought and political theology. The political sovereign, as the basis of law and legitimacy, instantiates the rule of the divine Sovereign on earth. Whether identified with the unitary general will of the people (Rousseau and Locke) or the representative person of the monarch (Hobbes), sovereignty is the means of overcoming the vicissitudes, multiplicities, and contingencies of nature by assimilating political power and authority in a single source. As Hobbes writes, the only way to preserve persons from the uncertainties and perils of the world and others is for them to "conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices,

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[102] Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 176.

[103] Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 84. For a slightly different articulation of a political theology beyond transcendence, see Mark Lewis Taylor's discussion of "transimmanence," which attempts to go beyond the binary logic of transcendence and immanence, in Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 115–158.

[104] Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 49.

unto one Will."[105] Similarly, Rousseau writes of the unified body politic, constituted by the indivisible sovereignty of the *volonté générale*: "Each of us puts his person and his full power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole."[106] In these various traditions of modern political thought, the indivisibility of sovereign power, however formulated and exercised, is taken to be the necessary foundation for political life. But in so making indivisible sovereignty the basis of political legitimacy, radical political theologians argue, they eviscerate the democratic multitude as a political reality, rendering it impotent. Whereas radical democracy is premised on the diffusion of power amidst the complex constituent relations of the multitude, sovereign power reflects the sovereign deity: a single source of uncontestable authority which stands beyond the field of politics and orders its life. Radical political theology, instead, as Crocket writes, is "the freedom to think God without God, liberated from the weight of traditional formulations that constrain its creativity in dogmatics and sap its vitality in apologetics."[107] Political theology, Robbins declares, needs a "flight from sovereignty" altogether.[108] Thus, radical political theology does not so much seek a replacement of one kind of sovereign power with another as it does a "call[ing] into question all power, including that of God."[109] In

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[105] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120, quoted in Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 146.

[106] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50. See the discussion of sovereignty and political theology in Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 359–399.

[107] Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 12.

[108] Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 6.

[109] Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 47.

other words, it seeks to imagine and defend a democracy without sovereignty, made possible by a "weak" God dispossessed of sovereignty and power.[110]

That sovereignty, both human and divine, is in this perspective necessarily indivisible invites, finally, interrogation into the way monotheism legitimates and undergirds forms of sovereign power. As Crockett contends, "the sovereign power of God is intrinsically connected to the oneness of God."[111] To think of God other than as sovereign, then, is also to think of God other than as one.[112] More orthodox political theologies, like Milbank's, also attempt to combat political theology's historic obsession with the oneness of God, and thus also of political sovereignty, by recovering the Trinitarian and relational nature of God. But radical political theologians deem this still insufficient insofar as Trinitarian theology retains its monotheistic commitment to divine oneness. They instead seek out more heterodox, post-monotheistic doctrines of God. "Polydoxy," in contrast to orthodoxy, conceives of God not as transcendent, sovereign, and one, but as immanent within world processes, constituted by uncertainty and contingency, and fundamentally marked by multiplicity, rather than unity.[113] The God of radical political theology is a God "beyond monotheism."[114] Catherine Keller, for instance, contests a vision of the God-world relation as a One-many relation, arguing

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[110] On the "weakness of God," see Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 43–59; Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 173–179.

[111] Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 47.

[112] Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, 49.

[113] See Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, "Introduction," in *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, eds. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1–15.

[114] See Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

instead that the Hebrew scriptures' "theopoetics of creation" envisions a "third" between God and creation. The *tehom*, or "deep," cannot be straightforwardly "identified with 'God', nor with the All," but rather signifies the "womb" of chaotic "self-organizing complexity" out of which a mutual God-creation process of becoming emerges.[115] *Tehom* decenters God as the sole Creator, thus inserting instability, contingency, and multiplicity into the very origin of being. Recognizing the fundamental multiplicity at the heart of being, radical political theology develops an ontology of plurality and diversity without needing to resort to accounts of transcendent unity or oneness within which to locate it.

Such a rejection of doctrines of transcendence, sovereignty, and oneness, in favor of immanence, metaphysical weakness, and divine multiplicity, opens up political theology, it is argued, to an embrace of democratic pluralism and conflictual multiplicity. As Robbins writes in his theological case for agonistic politics, radical democracy is simply "the political instantiation of the death of God."[116] With God no longer the sovereign, transcendent, and indivisible source of political authority, represented by the earthly sovereign, theology can embrace the conflicts, pluralities, and contingencies of democratic politics without reserve. Indeed, Keller interprets the experience of agonistic politics in theological terms. Like creation emerging from *tehom* in a "self-organizing complexity at the edge of chaos," democratic politics consists in the construction of a "collective assemblage across critical difference," a self-organized plurality without hierarchy.[117] Like the multiplicitous God and the chaotic *tehom*, democratic politics is

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[115] Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 227, 39, 117.

[116] Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 6.

[117] Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 33–34.

marked by multiplicity, antagonism, and difference. As with agonistic theorists, Keller does not lament the conflicts of democracy. Rather, she celebrates them as an "amorous agonism," generating possibilities for the formation of "coalitional intersectionality" across difference and "queerly diverse discourses of public responsibility, social justice, and sustaining ecology."[118] Amorous agonism embraces the conflictual political without sentimentality, even as it sees it as an opportunity for radical hospitality and neighbor-love. And without the haunting sense of a transcendent God standing over and above the vicissitudes of the political, radical political theology can embrace agonistic politics as the unfolding of immanent divinity.

In sum, radical political theology approaches politics and its entanglement with notions of sovereignty as a problem concerning the doctrine of God, to be countered with a revisionist doctrine of God. The transcendent, sovereign, one God of classical theism grounds a politics of sovereignty that eviscerates democratic life and the possibility of egalitarian political formations. To defend radical democracy and articulate a political theology to support it, then, means reconceiving of divinity beyond concepts of transcendence, sovereignty, and oneness. It is at this point that we see just how closely radical political theology resembles the strategies of the postliberal and civic liberal political theologies examined in the previous chapter. Both operate within the same analogical frame of theorizing the political in light of the divine. But whereas the Augustinians considered earlier take the sociality of the Trinity to exemplify a normative account of human sociality and so theorize proper political relations in light of divine relationality, radical political theologians simply reverse the script. Notions of divinity

[118] Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth*, 156–157.

are revised in light of the exigencies and demands of democratic life. Whether or not these theological revisions are desirable is somewhat beside the point. What interests me here is the fact that radical political theologians commit the same mistake as the political theologies they criticize. They remain captured by an analogical frame which does not recognize the differences between Creator and creature that proper *analogia* sees. But rather than elevate the earthly political into the divine life of the Trinity, radical political theology democratizes the sovereign God within the immanent political.

In this way radical political theology presumes the same analogical frame as the political theologies of sovereignty it opposes, presuming a necessary correspondence between the divine nature and the structures and forms of political rule. Moreover, it faces their same limitations: an inability to name and describe the difference creaturehood makes and the kinds of political relation proper to finite human creatures. To be sure, theologies of divine sovereignty have often been, and still are, used as justification for earthly sovereign regimes, seeing the doctrine of God as a means of legitimizing political authority. As a form of critique, radical political theology is entirely right to interrogate and challenge this identification of divine and earthly sovereignty in the name of a more radical democracy. My contention is simply that a theological defense of radical democratic politics need not make direct appeal to any particular notion of divine power or Triune sociality as the necessary basis and normative framework for such a politics. In other words, it is possible, and even desirable, to ground a democratic political theology not in the doctrine of God but in the doctrine of creation and an attendant theological anthropology. Doing so, I will show in the following chapter, reveals the way creaturely sociality manifests in both conflict and community, each constitutive of the other.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agonistic Creatures: A Political-Theological Anthropology

1. Introduction

In the previous chapters I have shown the difficulty much contemporary political theology has with conflict, a difficulty that arises both from its construal of political community and difference in oppositional terms and, more broadly, its framing of creaturely sociality in analogical relation to divine sociality in a way that obscures their important differences. I began to address the former problematic in chapter three by sketching an account of "agonistic community" wherein conflict amidst difference is not a threat to community but constitutive of its dynamic flourishing. I develop this account of political community further in chapter five. In the present chapter, I wish to address the latter problematic, proposing a distinctly *creaturely* account of sociality and relation that moves beyond analogical appeals to the social Trinity and instead attends to the dissimilarities of creaturely relation—chiefly, the way conflict is a fundamental feature of the goodness of creaturehood and creaturely sociality. In so doing, I mean to challenge the hold which the doctrine of God and theories of sovereignty have on contemporary political theological discourse. Rather than theorizing the political as a mirror of the divine, either critically or constructively, I propose beginning an account of politics with a careful analysis of creation. In particular, I turn to theological anthropology as a resource for political theology, developing what I term a "political-theological anthropology." By examining and elucidating the distinct features of human persons that mark their creaturehood—namely, finitude, contingency, and embodiment—I sketch an

account of human persons as "agonistic creatures" whose sociality is made manifest through conflictual negotiations of difference.

Assigning theological anthropology a fundamental place in political theological thinking marks my proposal as somewhat anomalous among political theological assessments of democracy, pluralism, and contemporary politics. These tend to begin with and privilege doctrines of God,[1] eschatology,[2] ecclesiology,[3] Christology,[4] or natural law.[5] Yet, as Luke Bretherton has argued, if thinking about politics is directly tied to the question of what it means to be human, then we must acknowledge theological anthropology to be "the normative basis of political theology."[6] According to Bretherton, political theology, at least insofar as it attempts to be *theological*, which is to say,

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[1] The classic examples being Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). For a more recent example, see Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981).

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

[4] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986).

[5] John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Experiment* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960); Thomas J. Bushlack, *Politics for a Pilgrim Church: A Thomistic Theory of Civic Virtue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015); Vincent W. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[6] Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 21. A similar attempt to articulate a political theology grounded in theological anthropology can be seen in Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defense of Political Liberalism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

normative, must think "from the standpoint of what it means to be a *creature*."[7] Consideration of politics, the formation of a common life amidst difference, emerges from reflection on our humanity because, as Bretherton writes, "to be who we are we need others, and this entails negotiating some form of common life with them, either through positing a common humanity or through bringing difference/alterity into fruitful relationship."[8] For creatures, politics arises both from our natural capacities for association and the need for negotiation of difference within that association.[9] In this chapter, I structure my political-theological anthropology of agonistic creatures around three themes: finitude, contingency, and embodiment. Investigation of each of these, I argue, reveals conflict to be an ineliminable feature of creaturely life. Together, they elicit an account of creaturely sociality capable of negotiating conflict in the building of a flourishing common life. Before venturing into theological anthropology, however, I turn to the subject of multiplicity in order to show again the necessity of moving beyond analogical thinking about difference and to begin carving out space for a distinctly creaturely politics.

2. Multitudo*, Creaturely and Divine*

Recall that a principal issue in the political theologies examined in the previous chapters concerned conceptualizing the meaning of creaturely multiplicity at the ontological level. Postliberal Augustinians, Augustinian civic liberals, and radical

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[7] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 21.

[8] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 313.

[9] Bretherton's "consociationalist" politics builds on the legacy of Althusius and sees both pluralism and commonality as belonging to creatures by nature. See Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 389–397.

political theologians all agree that difference and multiplicity are intrinsic features of creation, not secondary degenerations of a primordial and more fundamental unity. Multiplicity belongs to creation *as such*. But how should this multiplicity be conceptualized theologically? Both schools of Augustinians turn to the sociality of the divine Trinity for a pattern of harmonious unity-in-difference that can serve as a template for imagining creaturely relations amidst difference. Radical political theologians dissent from this picture, arguing that the affirmation of democratic multiplicity and its agonistic relations of difference depends on a renunciation of divine unity altogether. Oneness, even when conceptualized in properly Trinitarian terms, implies a kind of hegemonic unity and sovereignty that undermines a truly emancipatory radical democratic politics. They instead offer an account of divine immanence wherein God becomes subject to the contingencies of creaturely multiplicity. Both of these strategies, I have argued, remain captive to an analogical picture of divine and human sociality that fails to appreciate the distinctly *creaturely* aspects of human sociality, difference, and multiplicity—that is, the difference creaturehood makes. Here, I delineate these important divergences between Trinitarian and creaturely multiplicity, drawing on Thomas Aquinas' theological metaphysics of creation. In doing so, I offer a theological basis for affirming conflicts within creation's multiplicity as an aspect of the dynamic goodness of creation.

Thomas Aquinas may appear at first a surprising resource to consult for a theological description of multiplicity and conflict. After all, Thomas is often remembered as one who upheld a Neoplatonist construal of the One and the many, hierarchies of being, and ontological harmony rooted in the single divine source from whom all creation proceeds. Moreover, many have shown how Thomas's doctrine of the

analogia entis frames a theology of participation wherein the qualities and faculties of creatures correspond to their divine perfections.[10] The emphasis in these readings of Thomas is usually on the similarities of the Creator-creature analogy rather than the differences. One might expect, then, Thomas's theology to yield a vision of creation similar to those I have been criticizing, one wherein harmonic creaturely difference images the Trinitarian difference of God. This, however, would be a mistake. As David Burrell has shown, Thomas makes use of the notion of analogy not so much to develop a theory of being, nor to delineate a basic set of features common to both humanity and God, but in fact to register the fundamental *discontinuities* between creation and Creator, humanity and divinity, and thus the enormous difficulties of speaking about God at all.[11] *Analogia*, for Thomas, operates more in the mode of the *via negativa* than affirmative predication.[12] Thus, while Thomas of course recognizes certain patterns of human being and action that reflect divinity and manifest the *imago dei*, he is always quick to detail and specify the larger differences and divergences between their divine and human manifestations. In this way, I suggest, Thomas's careful attention to the asymmetries and

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[10] The most important defense of the *analogia entis* being, of course, Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). For more recent treatments, specifically of Thomas's positions, see Steven A. Long, *Analogia Entis: On the Analogy of Being, Metaphysics, and the Act of Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996); and the essays in *Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). For an argument that the *analogia entis*, at least as it is commonly understood, does not exist in Thomas's thought, see Laurence Paul Hemming, "*Analogia non Entis sed Entitatis*: The Ontological Consequences of the Doctrine of Analogy," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (2004): 118–128; and Laurence Paul Hemming, *Postmodernity's Transcending: Devaluing God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 111–136.

[11] See especially, David B. Burrell, CSC, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 119–170; and David B. Burrell, CSC, "Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 77–98.

[12] Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language*, 119–124.

dissimilarities between divine and human being and action make him a valuable resource for understanding the unique features of creaturely sociality. Put simply, Thomas helps move thinking about creaturely sociality beyond analogical *likeness*, showing the ways creatures manifest sociality differently from God, in a distinctly creaturely mode.

This careful attention to similarity and dissimilarity is especially evident in Thomas's treatment of the nature of creation's multiplicity. In his treatment of creation in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas offers a theological interpretation of the plurality of God's creatures which sees their multiplicity to be representative of divine perfection.[13] Creation is brought into being so that God's "goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them" (*ST* I.47.1). Because this representation involves a relationship of finite to infinite, and God's "goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone," Thomas says, God created a multiplicity of things to participate in the divine goodness, each according to its kind (*ST* I.47.1). Thus "what was wanting to one in representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another," for "goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold (*multipliciter*) and divided" (*ST* I.47.1). So far, so Neoplatonist. The multitude of finite creatures together represent the infinite One from whom they proceed and have as their source. But Thomas then goes further, departing from the Neoplatonist frame of the One and the many. Because God, whose goodness creation manifests, is Triune plurality, the cause of creaturely multiplicity is not infinite oneness but divine multiplicity, what

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), I.47.1. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ST*.

Thomas calls *multitudo transcendens*, or "transcendental multitude" (*ST* I.30.3.ad2).[14] "[E]very procession and multiplication of creatures," Thomas says, is "caused by the procession of the distinct divine persons" of the Trinity.[15] Thus, rather than suggesting it is the harmony of creaturely difference that represents the transcendental unity and oneness of the Godhead, Thomas declines to speak of unity and oneness at all. He shows instead that the *multiplicatio* of creatures bears the marks of the multiplicity of the Trinity, the distinction and relations of the divine persons. In other words, Thomas is less interested in how the harmonies of creaturely difference manifest Trinitarian oneness and more interested in showing how the distinction of persons in God grounds the proliferation of difference in creation. Because of this, multiplicity has a fundamental place in the order of being and is in no way subsequent to unity or oneness. Again, in Thomas's own words, multiplicity is a "transcendental." As Gilles Emery notes, "the plurality of genera and species in creatures, the multiplicity of individuals within the species, and the multiplicity of events that constitute history," for Thomas, are sourced in and representative of the "first distinction, that of the divine persons."[16] Importantly, then, the analogy of divine and creaturely multiplicity is centered not on the capacity for unity, but rather the irreducibility of difference.

On these matters, Thomas follows a somewhat similar line of thought as the Augustinians considered in chapter two. Creaturely difference witnesses to the source of

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[14] On this often-neglected notion of "transcendental multitude" in Thomas, see Joshua Lee Harris, "Transcendental Multitude in Thomas Aquinas," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 89 (2015): 109–118.

[15] Aquinas, I *Sent*. d.26 q.2 art.2 ad.2. Quoted in Gilles Emery, O.P., "Trinity and Creation," in *Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 72.

[16] Emery, "Trinity and Creation," 73.

creation, who is "transcendental peace through differential relation."[17] To be sure, Thomas does see in creaturely multiplicity a likeness to divine relations. But he also importantly complements these insights with attention to the asymmetries and discontinuities between divine and creaturely multiplicity. Indeed, these differences may be even more determinative for an account of human sociality than the similarities. Acknowledging them will open up conceptual space for the possibility for appreciating conflict as an inherent part of creaturely multiplicity in a way distinct from God's. Consider, for instance, how Thomas speaks of "number" with reference to God and creatures. Earlier in the *Prima Pars*, in question 30 on the "plurality of persons in God," Thomas had carefully distinguished the nature of Trinitarian plurality from its creaturely forms. For him, the "numerical terms" used to speak of distinction in God do not "denote anything positive in God" at all, but only possess a "negative meaning" intended to "remove something" in descriptions of the divine Trinity—namely, the possible misunderstanding that the oneness of God might preclude personal relations (*ST* I.30.3). For creatures, on the other hand, numerical terms apply straightforwardly as a description of material distinctions between them: "Number in this sense is found only in material things which have quantity" (*ST* I.30.3). "[N]umeral terms predicated of God," Thomas writes, "are not derived from number, a species of quantity, for in that sense they could bear only a metaphorical sense in God" (*ST* I.30.3). Indeed, metaphor, for Thomas, implies too close a relation between creaturely and divine multiplicity. In God, numerical terms do not "denote an accident added to being," just as "oneness does not add anything to being" (*ST* I.30.3). Instead, in God, numerical terms signal the indivisibility of the

[17] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 6.

divine essence *and* demonstrate that the subsisting relations which characterize that essence are not identical. Thomas is well aware that this puts significant pressure on the ordinary meaning of "number." He is asking his readers to affirm an understanding of number with respect to God which names neither division nor composite parts within the divine essence but only the "transcendental multitude" which *is* the one God. Use of the concept of number to speak of God is, then, to go the route of the *via negativa*.

For Thomas, numerical language—the language used to characterize multiplicity and difference—refers to divinity and creation in fundamentally *different* ways. Indeed, the gulf between these ways is so great that speaking of their relation in terms of "analogy" risks distortion. Moreover, multiplicity's relation to unity manifests in quite different forms in God and creatures. For while multiplicity exists in God without division, it obtains of creatures by virtue of their distinct finite existences. In God, "'One' does not exclude multitude, but division" (*ST* I.30.3.ad.3), which is why both oneness and multiplicity can be named as transcendentals, each paradoxically identical to the divine essence. Yet, in creatures, multiplicity necessarily denotes divisions between creatures. The critical differences between divine and creaturely multiplicity that Thomas delineates here help us see the meaning of materiality for creaturely plurality. To be material, embodied, conditions the forms of relation and communion available to creatures and the possibilities for unity amidst plurality. Put simply, creatures cannot manifest unity amidst multiplicity in the way God does because of their *bodies*. And, as we will see, this is a gift of creaturehood, not a matter of ontological lack. To be embodied is to accept a certain degree of separateness from other creatures. In fact, to attempt to transcend these

creaturely limits, to aspire to divine forms of communion, often entails a violent intrusion upon other creatures and their bodily integrity.

Creaturely multiplicity and relation, in other words, manifest within the particular conditions of creatureliness, conditions which differentiate divine and human sociality in fundamental ways. I do not take this to be a particularly controversial or innovative claim, even as it fundamentally dissents from a predominant strategy in Christian moral and theological reflection to consider the Trinity a normative template for creaturely social life. It is simply to recognize the difference creaturehood makes. It is precisely this difference, I maintain, that is too often unrecognized, unregistered, and underappreciated in theological writing on social and political life, especially that which operates within an analogical framing of divine and human relations. Given that much political theology does operate within this analogical frame, either constructively proposing or critically interrogating the patterning of social life with respect to conceptions of divinity, breaking analogy's hold on political theology can generate new ways of thinking about politics in terms of creation, thus more fully acknowledging the complex conditions of human creaturehood.

Moreover, as will become clear in my explication of these conditions in what follows, moving beyond analogical thinking about divine and creaturely sociality can open up the possibility of appreciating conflict in creaturely life. Conflict belongs to creaturely multiplicity and difference in ways it does not in God, and theological projects quick to propose the social Trinity as a solution to the complexities and precarities of creaturely life too often eclipse this important fact. Conflict, as I conceive it here, is an inherent part of the realization of creaturely multiplicity. That we must speak of a

"realization" of creaturely multiplicity already signals important departures from the transcendental plurality of God. Yet as Ian McFarland rightly recognizes, creaturely diversity and multiplicity are "realized in time and space through creatures' varied movements: the diverse ways in which they realize their several and mutually irreducible sorts of creaturely perfection."[18] To be sure, human creatures are ordered to charitable relations with others, a perfection of their natural sociability. That they are so, and that they also realize the perfections of their unique and different selves in a multitude of ways, making use of a variety of diverse goods within a time and space shared with others, however, means that conflicts between creatures are unavoidable. But this is not a lamentable aspect of human creaturehood. Nor does conflict arise from something human creatures lack. Rather, conflict emerges from the simple fact that the goods of creation and the means of using these goods are abundant and multiple, that the creatures who desire and make use of them do so in different and various ways, and that many of these goods are ones held in common, thus necessitating forms of negotiation over their shared use. Multiplicity, under the conditions of creatureliness, generates conflict. Given the multiplicity of created goods, ways of using these goods, and unique compositions of human creatures who share a life around these goods, it is inevitable that there will be moments in which human creatures' aspirations, desires, preferences, and actions will come into conflictual contact with others. Unpacking how this occurs and how conflict necessarily emerges from these conditions of creatureliness will be the task of the rest of this chapter.

[18] Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 68.

3. Agonistic Creatures: Finitude, Contingency, Embodiment

What follows is an attempt to offer a detailed analysis of those conditions of human creaturehood that generate conflict as a necessary aspect of creaturely sociality. I frame this consideration of agonistic creaturehood around three primary categories: finitude, contingency, and embodiment.[19] Conflict, I argue, is an inherent part of human creaturehood because embodied selves come to be over time in a world of contingency. Human beings are finite, contingent, and embodied creatures, constituted by a diverse multiplicity of aspirations, desires, and ways of using created goods to realize those aspirations and desires with others. Human creatures are also fundamentally social beings, which means that inherent to their self-realization as creatures are capacities to negotiate instances in which certain goods, desires, and actions come up against those of others. Finally, some of the goods that human creatures make use of in their various ways are *common* goods, which means deliberation, negotiation, and coordinated action with others is necessary for their shared use. In sum, human creatures are fated to live and act together despite their multiple and often competing desires for how that common life is to be arranged and how they might live and act within it. Both sociality and conflict are fundamental to human creaturely existence in this way, each internal to the other. An analytical inspection of the conditions of creaturehood—finitude, contingency, and embodiment—reveals how this is so.

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[19] My account of human creatures in these terms has commonalities with the account of creation put forward in McFarland, *From Nothing*, 57–83. McFarland excellently attends to the important distinctions between divine and creaturely existence, treating the former in terms of being "intrinsically living, productive, and present," and the latter as "contingent, subject to movement, and occupy[ing] a particular place." My focus on *human* creatures and, even more specifically, the social nature of human creatures, leads me to focus on somewhat different aspects of human creatureliness. Nevertheless, there is a certain compatibility between McFarland's triad of contingency, movement, and place, and my own categories of finitude, contingency, and embodiment. His discussion informs much of my thinking in what follows.

3.1. Finitude

"Creaturely being is limited being," writes David Kelsey. This limitation in being is the substance of "the ontological finitude of the creaturely realm" and a chief marker of the dissimilarity between finite and infinite existence.[20] Creation, given by God *ex nihilo*, is contingent being, an un-necessity, and thus dependent on God for its reality. "No particular constituent element, nor any universal dimension of creation, is inherently everlasting or exists necessarily," notes Kelsey.[21] Finitude, in this sense and as I develop it below, is the obverse of necessity and eternality. Moreover, as a consequence of this ontological dependence and limitation in being, all creatures possess an inherent tendency toward dissolution. This is quite obvious from a biological perspective. Every material being is "a complex set of interrelated energy systems that is inherently subject over time to progressive disintegration. Energy becomes progressively less organized and eventually dissipates altogether, and the creature ceases to be."[22] But it is also a theologically significant claim. That creatures by nature tend toward dissolution is a consequence of their creation *ex nihilo*. Athanasius rightly noted that human creatures are "corruptible by nature," having a tendency to "return to non-being through corruption," unless otherwise preserved from "their natural state by the grace of participation in the Word."[23] Again, as Kelsey puts it, living bodies are "inherently fallible and defectible";

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[20] David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 201.

[21] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 201.

[22] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 201–202.

[23] Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54–55. See the excellent discussion of Irenaeus and Athanasius on creaturely vulnerability and corruptibility in Paul M. Blowers, *Visions and Faces of the Tragic: The Mimesis of Tragedy and the Folly of Salvation in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 44–45.

they "may and do defect from levels of energy exchange and from levels of exercise of power that they once enjoyed."[24] Living bodies are especially prone to such processes because they must "develop from immature to mature states, and must mature in regard to a large range of powers and in regard to a large range of capacities to regulate the exercise of those powers."[25] Living beings are born, grow, deteriorate, and die. And, aside from living organisms, the creaturely realm as a whole is subject to such atrophy and entropic dissolution.[26] Creaturely existence is delimited with nonexistence on either side.

Another way of formulating this limitation of creaturely being is to speak of its boundedness by time. Temporality is a specification of finitude, denoting the particular limitation of *duration*. Of course, space is the dimension of finitude correlative to time.[27] Created beings possess a limitation on the duration of their being but also on the physical and metaphysical space they occupy.[28] For creatures, as McFarland notes, space marks the distinction between beings, "defined (and thus limited) by specific features that render them distinctly different from each other."[29] Space is, then, the condition for

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[24] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 267.

[25] Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 283.

[26] For a theological reflection on the significance of this for the doctrine of creation and eschatology, see Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 97–124.

[27] See Aquinas' discussion and dismissal of the possibility of a "sensible infinite"—that is, a material body that is infinite—in Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaria in octo libros Physicorum*, trans. Pierre H. Conway, O.P. (Columbus, OH: College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1962), III, lect. 8, 350.

[28] With the possible exception of angels who, by virtue of being non-material, do not relate to space in the same way material creatures do. Nevertheless, as Thomas Aquinas argues, non-material creatures like angels nevertheless have a "place," since to deny this would mean to attribute a divine property to them, namely omnipresence (*ST* I.52.1–3). See McFarland, *From Nothing*, 65n23.

[29] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 66.

creaturely relation, and in this way importantly different from divine relation. Here I speak of finitude primarily in terms of time, though with the assumption that creaturely existence in time is played out also in space, a reality I return to below in consideration of creaturely embodiment.

Among the many creatures of God, living creatures manifest their finitude in time and space through organic processes of birth, growth, decay, and disintegration, as well as in relating to and interacting with other creatures. We might call these various processes aspects of creaturely "movement," construed in its broadest sense. As McFarland notes, movement is "the mode by which creatures both exhibit and achieve their own peculiar and distinctively created sorts of perfection."[30] Because perfection belongs as a *property* only to the uncreated God, the creature has perfection as "its goal rather than its beginning."[31] McFarland refers to this aspect of creatures' finitude as a "lack" of their "fullness of existence," and the processes of self-realization and movement as the means of coming more fully into this fullness.[32] But this language of "lack" should not be taken to mean that creatures' development over time entails a kind of fall from a preferred original *stasis*. Development and self-realization through movement over time are inherent to the goodness of creaturely existence, not a fall from it.[33] From photosynthesis to eating to speech, movement encompasses all those activities,

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[30] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 63.

[31] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 63. McFarland is here following Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 4.20.7.

[32] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 64.

[33] McFarland notes Maximus the Confessor as one especially attuned to this aspect of creation (*From Nothing*, 64). See Maximus's *Ambiguum* 15, in St. Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in*

however simple or complex, that allow creatures to manifest their creaturehood more fully over time.

Human creatures, the specific kind of living beings I am concerned with in this chapter, experience the finitude of time in a particular way, namely as *persons*. In addition to their biological development and deterioration, human creatures realize and manifest their personhood over time and in space with others. Life, for human creatures, is the time it takes to manifest personality, both individually and collectively. This temporal dimension of personhood is obvious in our ordinary thinking about human development. Most would not doubt that a child is a person, even as they also understand her or his personality to be only a nascent form of her or his later self. The passage of time enables an unfolding of personality, an exploration and actualization of capacities, skills, traits, aspirations, desires, and qualities which make individual persons unique creatures. We recognize the continuity (and discontinuity) between a person's childhood, adolescence, and stages of adulthood to be not just a biological process of growth but also the development, cultivation, and realization of personhood.

One way to name the near infinite set of activities through which human creatures realize their personhood over time is "action." Not all movements in which human creatures realize their personalities are actions. Some, for instance, involve being acted upon or suffering the movements of other creatures—being betrayed or injured, becoming ill, being loved. Others involve more or less unintentional and involuntary activities—growing in height, aging, failing in memory. But those movements which we most associate with human creatures' self-realization as persons are in some way

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Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios, trans. Fr. Maximos Constas (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 127–129.

voluntarily caused, meaningful, and intentional, and these are actions. Action, as Charles Pinches has shown, is the specific kind of activity whose context or "home" is humanness.[34] In other words, an action is a movement capable of being understood as "one of the sorts of things human beings do" and thus belonging to an "identifiable set of behaviors that we expect from human beings."[35] The nearly countless kinds of action available to human creatures are meaningful, both for ourselves and to others, insofar as the context of our life together as human creatures renders them intelligible. Here, actions manifest and realize human personality. Action sustained through time, and especially actions that can be seen together in a more or less unified or "narratable" way,[36] constitute the unfolding of personality.

To summarize what I have contended thus far: Creation possesses finitude by virtue of its creation *ex nihilo*. This finitude entails the particular limitations of time and space, and thus also the inherent tendency toward dissolution. Finite being, then, is marked by the duration of its existence—it is "being in time." Temporality, however, is not a defect of creaturely existence but an aspect of its goodness, for it is the stage upon which creatures, and living creatures in particular, exhibit movement and thus realize their creaturehood. Human creatures manifest personality over time through movement and particularly those movements known as actions. In this way, time is for finite human creatures a condition of personhood, identity, or selfhood. But it is also the condition of conflict. Let us explore how so.

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[34] Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 13–14.

[35] Pinches, *Theology and Action*, 15.

[36] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 204–225.

In several important places throughout his work, Rowan Williams instructively develops an account of selfhood as emerging through action over time and exchange with others. For Williams, modern philosophy and theology have been held captive by a picture of selfhood that trades in spatial terms. Particularly after Descartes, "authentic" selfhood, identity, and self-knowledge are construed in terms of an "interior" or inner life which is expressed publicly to and with others.[37] Williams, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, questions this Cartesian picture of interiority and its strict binaries of self/other, inner/outer, and subject/object. While not wishing to dispense with notions of selfhood or interiority altogether, Williams proposes a rethinking of selfhood in temporal rather than spatial terms. "We tend to conceive interiority," he writes, "in terms of space—outer and inner, husk and kernel; what if our 'inner life' were better spoken of in terms of extension in time? the time it takes to understand?"[38] A helpful metaphor for this imagining of selfhood, he suggests, can be found in visual art.[39] When people speak of the "life" of a painting, that which makes a work worth pondering, gazing at, or contemplating, they signal the way its beauty is elusive, not able to be exhaustively taken in by immediate apprehension. It demands the taking of time. In a painting, Williams writes, "there is manifestly nothing there except the work itself: there is no *region* behind or beyond what is seen and sensed that would explain the 'inner life' of the work, nothing

[37] See Rowan Williams, "The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 186–202.

[38] Rowan Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics," in *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 240.

[39] Williams, "Suspicion of Suspicion," 198.

that is private or secret."[40] The work's life is all "'on the surface', *is* the material surface, in fact."[41] Yet it demands of the viewer the difficult labor of sustained engagement over time, patient presence and attention to the work, in order to appreciate its depth. So we ought to think of the selfhood of human creatures, Williams suggests, as a depth which unfolds as it is shown, revealed, to others and ourselves by "speaking and acting as to invite the taking of time."[42]

Construing selfhood in these temporal terms, Williams argues, entails seeing selfhood as something cultivated, "the product of *time*," rather than as something already existent "beneath the world of time and flesh" and found through self-excavation.[43] Selfhood is not given but emerges as "an integrity one struggles to bring into existence."[44] Moreover, this emergence of selfhood occurs in the public realm of exchange, conversation, and negotiation with others. It is, Williams explains, a selfhood gained "in relation, conversation, mutual recognition," a self-knowledge attained through self-giving and reciprocity.[45] We should expect as much from creatures who possess a natural sociability. To acknowledge the necessity of exchange, however, is also to recognize a profound instability in the emergence of selfhood, for "conversation and negotiation are of their nature unpredictable, 'unscripted'; their outcome is not

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[40] Williams, Suspicion of Suspicion," 198.

[41] Williams, "Suspicion of Suspicion," 198.

[42] Williams, "Suspicion of Suspicion," 198.

[43] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 240; Williams, "Suspicion of Suspicion," 200.

[44] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 240, here quoting Walter A. Davis, *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 105.

[45] Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology*, 71.

determined."[46] Indeed this emergence of being through indeterminacy and time is a feature of the whole creation, says Williams, "whose good will take time to realise, whose good is to emerge from uncontrolled circumstance."[47] For Williams, then, creation's temporality and indeterminacy—its finitude—are aspects of its created goodness, not fallenness. Even so, this means creation is "pregnant with the risk of tragedy, conflicting goods, if the good of what is made is necessarily bound up with taking time."[48]

This is the critical point for my purposes here: certain forms of conflict are a necessary entailment of creation's finite temporality and indeterminacy.[49] Drawing from Simone Weil's careful attention to the meaning of finitude for human action, Williams notes that "the attaining of goals in a material environment by timebound beings entails a 'mediation of desire'."[50] Such mediations are necessary because creation's contingency ensures that not all goods are "compossible."[51] "An authentically contingent world," he writes, "is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That's what it *is* to be created."[52] Bounded by time, we come to face conflicts. We are constrained to make particular choices and not others, pursue some goods and ends and not others, all of

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[46] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 240.

[47] Rowan Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (1992): 323.

[48] Williams, "Saving Time," 323.

[49] My conflictual account of temporality here has affinities with the wonderful theological construal of interrupted rhythm and temporality in Lexi Eikelboom, *Rhythm: A Theological Category* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[50] Williams, "Saving Time," 323.

[51] Williams, "Saving Time," 322.

[52] Williams, "Saving Time," 322.

which involves "the loss of certain specific goods for certain specific persons, because moral determination… recognizes that not all goods for all persons are *contingently* compatible."[53] Again, in this perspective conflict and loss are not marks of sin but simply of finitude, "the temporal ways in which the good is realised in a genuinely contingent world."[54] As will be clear in the analysis of contingency below, conflict is often the result of an *abundance* of goods and possible modes of achieving them under the constraints of finitude rather than a consequence of scarcity. Yet because human creatures cultivate selfhood over time, pursuing a multiplicity of goods, desires, aspirations, and goals under the constraints of time which press them toward some and not others, conflicts and incompatibilities between human creatures are bound to occur. Love will sometimes be unrequited. Disagreements about how to organize and use common goods will occur. Personalities will clash and persons will change over time, making friendships difficult to sustain. And all of these we can imagine not only in the world of sin but also in paradise, for they are aspects of the goodness of creaturehood, the realization of selfhood over time in a world of contingency. Conflict, loss, and disagreements of this kind only appear as a metaphysical problem if one presupposes an account of the self as static, autonomous, expressing desires and pursuing goods in competition with others. But this is the Cartesian self that Williams rightly pushes us to resist. If we instead see selfhood as always already involved in exchange, negotiation, and conversation with others—naturally sociable, we might say—then practices of mediating conflicts between agents are not only an obvious necessity if creatures are to live well with others; they are also

[53] Williams, "Saving Time," 322.

[54] Williams, "Saving Time,"323.

exactly the kinds of activities in which genuine selfhood emerges. Put differently, selfhood is produced not simply through action, but through coordinated action with and alongside others, which always entails what Weil calls the "mediation of desire."

If selves are indeed constituted in the way I have been proposing, we ought to see the mediation of desire in moments of conflict as a critical place in which selfhood is realized, self-knowledge made available, and sociality manifest. Not only is mediation necessary if diverse human creatures are to live together in some amount of peace, but if human creatures are naturally sociable it is because the emergence of their selfhood depends upon the transformations which occur in exchanges with others. Selfhood emerges over time precisely *through* the changes, conversions, and revisions of desire that occur in negotiating conflicts with others. As Williams writes, "I do not recognize the convergence of my interest and the other's without a move beyond opposition and negotiation."[55] The moment of opposition, of conflict with another, Williams calls the "adversarial moment in the construction of the self and its knowledge of itself."[56] It is through such adversarial, contentious negotiations with others—what the theorists of the previous chapter called "agonisms"—that authentic selfhood and self-knowledge emerges. Again, as Williams writes, we "only acquire identity in the *contentions* of exchange with another, in a set of particular and historical encounters with those elements in the world of personal transactions that deny my illusions of control." "I become a self," he continues, "only in the self-dispossession of discovering that there are things I

[55] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 243.

[56] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 242.

cannot acquire, goals I cannot attain."[57] Put in Christological terms, the activity of self-actualization is realized in *kenosis*.

Practices of negotiating difference and conflict are necessary if selfhood is to develop and mature over time in the way I have been describing, moving the subject from a state of pre-reflective desire to one of freedom with others. This is the essential insight of Hegel, Williams reminds. While some have read Hegel as proposing a notion of reconciliation that transcends conflict in the triumph of reason,[58] subordinating individuals and their difference to *Sittlichkeit*, Williams shows that Hegel's dialectical philosophy is one which recognizes the ineliminable place of contradiction, misrecognition, and conflict.[59] If we can speak of the success of reason at all, Williams writes, it is in "our discovery of how deeply we have misunderstood what we are as spirit or mind" and thus "what we must search out and change in ourselves."[60] The transformations involved in negotiating conflict are ways of growing toward self-knowledge, mutuality, and acknowledgement. Desires undergo conversion, change, and reordering in the encounter with otherness. This is not a tragic reality but a struggle toward authenticity and attunement with others.[61] It is to realize oneself and one's desires *with others*. The "realm of actual historical argument, error, penitence, and learning

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[57] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 243

[58] Williams refers to Martha Nussbaum, who sees Hegel's project as seeking the "elimination of conflict." See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 67.

[59] See Rowan D. Williams, "'The Sadness of the King': Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason," *Telos* 173 (2015): 21–36. For a similar account of Hegel, see Todd McGowan, *Emancipation after Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[60] Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 72.

[61] Cf. Molly Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics: Religion, Conflict, and Rituals of Reconciliation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 32–34.

which constitutes the life of spirit" is "a practice of reasoning love" in which persons come to find and express selfhood with others.[62] It is not without struggle and contention. But for Hegel and Williams, the mediation of desire through negotiating conflicts and difference with others, a practice which necessarily entails change, is exactly what makes creatures *human*. To avoid these conflicts and the risks they imply is to aspire to a divine-like certitude about oneself, to idolize a fixity and autonomy that eschews the necessary transformations of self and desire proper to human development.[63] "[T]o be a human subject," Williams writes, "is to be involved in understanding that growth, movement in time, entails a letting-go of past identities," and this is even "regularly accompanied by varying levels of grief" and acknowledgements of loss.[64] Nevertheless, as Williams notes, this "does not mean that we are being deprived of some desirable good by a hostile environment"; rather, it is simply to recognize the unavoidable changes and transfigurations that constitute our being in time.[65] It is a grief, in other words, proper to the limits of creaturehood, the experience of finitude. To be a creature, to be finite, is to suffer change, the transformation of self, in life with others.

3.2. Contingency

Thus far I have argued that the possibility of conflict is inherent to human creatures' realizing their selfhood through action over time. Implied in this discussion was a presumption that the various movements of human creatures are directed *toward*

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[62] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 72.

[63] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 58.

[64] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114.

[65] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114.

things in the world: objects, relationships, goods, courses of action, etc. Because these are manifold, and the various kinds of movement toward them multiple, human action in the world is open to take nearly endless possible forms. Yet because human creatures are finite they must choose some of these goods and courses of action and not others. Human action is in this sense *contingent*. It is open to multiple possible forms, none of which are absolutely necessary. By contingency, I simply mean that which is not necessary, that which is opposed to necessity.[66] And because human action is contingent in this way, I argue here, it is unpredictable and open to conflicts with the actions of others. I develop this line of argument by turning again to the thought of Aquinas, and in particular a dimension of his moral theory highlighted recently by John Bowlin—namely, his understanding of the "contingency of the human good."[67]

Thomas has not often been acknowledged to be a thinker of contingency. Standard readings of his ethics could be summarized as follows: a normative vision of the good life is available to us by natural reason; natural law discloses a determinate set of goods to be realized in order to achieve this goodness; the moral life can be outlined and specified by rules which govern human action so as to achieve these goods and virtues which allow agents to perform them. According to readers of Thomas who privilege natural law as the center of his moral thought, Thomas's ethical vision is one concerned with securing certain universally binding moral prescriptions for action. The first precepts of the natural law, they argue, prescribe either a determinate set of goods to direct human

[66] I am thus considering contingency primarily as a mark of creaturely humanity. For a more general account of contingency in the natural world, and the implications of contemporary scientific and quantum theoretical findings for the doctrine of creation, see John E. Thiel, "Creation, Contingency, and Sacramentality," *CTSA Proceedings* 67 (2012): 46–58.

[67] John Bowlin, *Continency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

moral action or binding rules for moral conduct which specify how to achieve the good concretely.[68] Thomas is thus perceived as a moralist decidedly *against* contingency, an advocate of absolutes, universality, and necessity. But in his careful study of Thomas's ethics and theory of human action, John Bowlin contests this reading of Thomas, revealing it to be a Kantian projection. Instead, he recovers the central theological character of Thomas's moral theory and account of the human good, and along with it Thomas's careful attention to the ways contingency, fortune, and chance shape human action.[69] Bowlin's critical achievement is to reposition Thomas's account of the moral life with respect to the transcendent object of human happiness, God, and in so doing elucidate the consequences of identifying God as the sole non-contingent good which persons seek—namely, that all other human goods are contingent ones, subject to chance and fortune, and constitutive of a complex web of other diverse goods to which the human will is indeterminately disposed. Here, I follow Bowlin's reading of Thomas in order to identify a further implication of Thomas's attention to contingency: the ineliminable place of conflict in social and political life.

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[68] The former is characteristic of the so-called New Natural Theory advocated by John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle; the latter is the view of more traditional neo-Scholastics. As Bowlin shows, those who identify with the New Natural Law reading of Thomas see the first precepts of the natural law as elucidating a determinate set of non-contingent, pre-moral goods determinative of happiness, from which modern moral philosophy can specify universal rules of moral action, something Thomas himself failed to do. Critics of New Natural Law theory argue that Thomas's account of the first precepts of the natural law do indeed prescribe certain moral actions as universally binding. What both share, according to Bowlin, is the misguided assumption that Thomas intends to offer a moral theory that "tells us what to do by offering a collection of precepts from which specific obligations can be derived" (Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 93). Yet this, Bowlin shows, is manifestly what Thomas does *not* intend to do. As Thomas says in the prologue to *ST* I-II.90, inquiry into the first precepts of the natural law is not intended to offer instruction for those seeking moral guidance but "to consider the extrinsic principles of action." The first precepts, in other words, are not prescriptive but *descriptive* of moral action. They specify the goods we intend in action necessarily and which we naturally desire. See Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 107–108.

[69] See especially chapter 3 of Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 93–137.

Perhaps the best place to begin a consideration of Thomas's understanding of the contingency of human moral action is to reiterate his insistence that only God and supernatural beatitude with God are goods tended to absolutely and necessarily by the will. As he says, only God is "good universally and from every point of view," the object of every human will which "tends to it of necessity, if it wills anything at all."[70] God is the object of human happiness, yet what happiness consists in, "whether in virtues, or knowledge or pleasure or anything else of the sort, has not been determined…by nature," Thomas writes.[71] So while the good in general is clearly known, the particular ways of realizing the good in human action are multiple and indeterminate. As Thomas writes, "Under good in general are included many particular goods, to none of which is the will determined."[72] Bowlin shows that, for Thomas, "all other potential objects of the will are good contingently, for the most part, from some points of view but not all, even those goods willed simply and absolutely."[73] In other words, in light of the necessary, ultimate good of God, the immanent goods of human life are imbued with non-necessity. This is to say, no particular contingent good is necessary to reach our final and ultimate good and also that any number of specific goods and course of actions are capable of realizing the good in particular.

A noticeable feature of Thomas's account of the human good is his sense that contingency arises not primarily out of creaturely lack but of the abundance of possible ways of realizing the good in particular courses of action and through the pursuit of

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[70] *ST* I-II.10.2, quoted in Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 60.

[71] *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*, 22.7, quoted in Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 59.

[72] *ST* I–II.10.1.3, quoted in Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 58.

[73] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 60.

particular goods. Thomas's understanding of the good life is, then, quite capacious, far from the stodgy, narrow imaginings of his modern interpreters. As Bowlin notes, according to Thomas "we need not intend a narrow collection of ends and pursue a fixed repertoire of actions in order to flourish according to our kind."[74] In fact, he writes, "the will is not disposed by natural necessity to intend and pursue certain goods as ends" at all, aside from happiness, whose object is God.[75] In Thomas's view, even life itself, a good willed and loved simply and naturally, is not an absolute good but a contingent one.[76] Most of the time, for the most part, and in most circumstances, life is to be desired, loved, and preserved, and pursuing it will be a proper way of attaining the good. Yet, as the examples of the martyrs show, even this most basic natural good of life is still a contingent one which may, in certain circumstances, actually impede attainment of the highest good of beatitude. In such cases, the good of self-preservation actually undermines the good of witness, which is chosen by the martyr as a means of attaining happiness. Thus, even a good we assume is most basic, absolute, and necessary—namely, physical life—is decidedly contingent and non-necessary. As Bowlin reminds of these contingent goods, "we are always able, at least in principle, to achieve some measure of happiness without first securing any one of them in particular,"[77] even as any of them may possibly be a reasonable means of pursuing happiness.

If all created goods are contingent in this way, choice—the exercise of prudence to determine which good is to be willed when, how, and under what conditions—is

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[74] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 59.

[75] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 58.

[76] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 61. See *ST* I-II.10.1; 94.2.

[77] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 59.

essential in determining "whether some contingently good means is in fact good in a particular instance for the purpose of achieving some intended end."[78] That we are given the freedom to choose the particular ways in which to realize the good in a world of contingency is, in Thomas's view, the substantive heart of moral agency. For Thomas, Bowlin shows, this indeterminacy of means implies that, in any given set of circumstances, "we are not determined to one course of action but indeterminately disposed to many and various things, precisely 'because of the nobility of (our) active principle, namely, the soul, whose power extends in a certain way to an infinite number of things' (*De virt. card.* 6)."[79] The deliberation involved in choosing among particular means to realize the good, Bowlin shows, is "both the principal mark of rational human action" and "the telling sign of its formal indeterminacy."[80] We should not be surprised by this emphasis on indeterminacy and contingency in Thomas's account of the moral life since his was, after all, an ethical theory concerned with the virtues and practical reason rather than the determination of moral absolutes and rules of conduct. The virtues aid our pursuit of the good and our realizing the good in particular courses of action, but they do not prescribe for us specific courses of action or a determinate hierarchy of goods. As Bowlin explains, for Thomas, "to say that we must be just and courageous, temperate and wise in order to flourish according to our kind tells us nothing about the specific activities we ought to pursue" or the specific actions we must perform.[81]

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[78] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 61.

[79] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 57.

[80] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 57.

[81] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 60.

Thomas is, on Bowlin's reading, a moralist far more concerned with the dispositions and character of the moral agent than with her successful obedience of moral precepts. This is not to say that moral precepts have no place in Thomas's thinking, only that he recognizes their limited usefulness in aiding good action in a world of contingency. For, Bowlin writes,

> If the objects of the will are contingent, good from some points of view but not others (*ST* I–II.10.2), and if the will is indeterminately disposed to all things that are good (*ST* I–II.10.1, 4), or nearly so (*ST* I–II.10.2), then the human good is too complex and unstable, and the character of right judgment with respect to that good too diverse and *ad hoc*, for us to think that praiseworthy human action can be captured in a set of precepts that specify rational choice with respect to that good.[82]

Even Thomas's discussion of the first precepts of the natural law, then, is less a specification of moral principles for action and more a description of "the theater in which practical reason acts, the various activities that occupy human life, and the various ends we pursue with nature's necessity."[83] Natural law, in Thomas's account, describes the general goods we pursue naturally in human action; it is not a set of prescriptions to attain those goods.[84]

Within this theater of human action the good can be realized in a whole host of different ways, depending on circumstance. This is what it means for the human good to

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[82] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 115.

[83] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 108.

[84] Interestingly, on this point Bowlin is more than happy to agree with the New Natural Law theorists who maintain that the first precepts "yield no concrete obligations or prohibitions, at least not by themselves." The disagreement is over "the significance of this omission"; the New Natural Law theorists lamenting it and Bowlin celebrating it. On Bowlin's reading, the first precepts specify "the goods to which we are naturally inclined. They are not inclinations we can decide to have or abandon, goods that we can consider desirable or not, and therefore Aquinas does not imply that we *ought* to have these inclinations or pursue these goods." Rather, the first precepts sketch the field in which moral actions as intelligible human actions occur. See Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 107–108.

be contingent. Moral precepts are less useful tools for discerning, choosing, and fulfilling the good in these circumstances than virtues and dispositions for acting, and this is why Thomas prefers to focus his moral theory on the latter. In short, for Thomas, the virtues are necessary both because of the abundance of possible ways of realizing the good in particular, as well as the great difficulty of doing so in a world of chance and contingency. To use Bowlin's term, the virtues are ways of "coping" with the contingency of the human good.[85] It is not that we are ignorant of the universal good of human creatures, which is beatitude, or that we fail to know the good in general. Rather, as Bowlin puts it, it is that "[t]he good is difficult to know in particular, and difficult to will even when it is known, because of contingencies of various kinds, within ourselves and in the circumstances of choice."[86] For Thomas, the difficulties of moral action are numerous, arising from the recalcitrance of the passions, the vicissitudes of temporal life, and the inability to anticipate fortune's effects on our powers to act. Indeed, the field of human action is so marked by these difficulties that Thomas devotes an entire question in the *Summa* to counsel (*consilium*)—the inquiry preceding choice which concerns the available objects of choice and their circumstances (*ST* I-II.14). Because "there is much uncertainty in things that have to be done," Thomas writes, and "because actions are concerned with contingent singulars (*singularia contingentia*), which by reason of their vicissitude are uncertain," practical reason must investigate the quickly changing and complex circumstances within which choice proceeds (*ST* I-II.14.1). When these variables of circumstance are joined to the additional complexity of there often being

[85] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 70.

[86] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 5.

numerous possible courses of action available in any given set of circumstances, knowing, choosing, and doing the good becomes difficult. A "situation is created," Bowlin writes, "where the context of choice is diverse and complex and the goodness of any potential means doubtful and uncertain."[87] The contingency of the human good in a world of chance and uncertainty, in other words, renders moral action difficult. The virtues, in Thomas's account, are dispositions and habits which enable us to cope with this difficulty, to will and do the good with constancy under these constraints and pressures on moral agency.

The difficulty of contingency—that we must discern and do the good in a world beyond our control and shaped by fortuities and matters of chance—is also what occasions conflict in creaturely life, especially between creatures as they seek to do the good. What appears to me the right and good course of action under a particular set of contingent circumstances may not only be at odds with what another perceives as good; it may also directly clash with another's desired course of action. My perception that a family recently evicted from their home is most deserving of the remaining available parish funds for assistance may collide with your hope to use the same money to aid a parishioner's burden from a sudden, unexpected surgery and its debilitating costs. To which cause we should employ the limited good of our parish emergency fund will be the work of careful deliberation of various contingent factors, terminating in a decision over the best course of action to responsibly care for and love our neighbors. But it will likely not fully satisfy all parties involved. Conflicts over the use of shared goods like this are many and familiar. What's more, conflict may occur between persons' courses of action

[87] Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 72.

as they seek to do the good. My intent to welcome a new family to the neighborhood with a celebratory block party may interfere with your desire for an early bedtime so as to capably aid a friend's move early the next morning. Conflicts between our various attempts to do the good in a shared world of contingency are bound to occur and demand negotiation.

Thomas was well aware of these kinds of conflicts and the difficulties of resolving them in creaturely social life. It is against the backdrop of the multiplicity of created goods, varieties of human pursuits, and conflicts between them that he develops his account of the common good. Accounting for the common good can aid, in principle, the orchestration of diverse goods and pursuits, as well as guide judgements about their proper ordering. Yet Thomas did not view the common good as a principle whose use would simply dissolves conflicts generated by the multiplicity of human goods and the contingency of human action. Instead, the common good is a formal principal that can aid the difficult deliberative work of negotiation, particularly the ordering of private and public goods. Even still, accounting for the common good will not produce absolute agreement between persons regarding their individual and collective attempts to realize the good. For whereas with God, Thomas says, good is apprehended universally and with respect to the common good of the whole universe, finite creatures can only apprehend good under different aspects. An object can be considered "in various ways by the reason, so as to appear good from one point of view, and not good from another point of view"; and for this reason, "various wills of various men can be good in respect of opposite things."[88] Appeals to the common good, then, are not meant to resolve all differences or

[88] *ST* I-II.19.10, quoted in Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune*, 71-72.

achieve total uniformity and consensus, even if it can prove to be a helpful principle for negotiating conflicting goods.

Bowlin's 2016 book *Tolerance Among the Virtues* can be seen, in many ways, as a follow-up to his reading of Thomas on contingency, an attempt to address this problematic of the limitation of the common good as a means of negotiating moral conflict, disagreement, and difference. Bowlin here develops an account of tolerance along broadly Thomistic lines as a "natural virtue" indexed to the plurality of human pursuits and the indeterminacy of human action.[89] In other words, while appeals to the common good may be sufficient for resolving certain kinds of conflict, other conflicts and disagreements demand the patient endurance of objectionable difference. Against those who aspire to "moral colloquy" as a preeminent ideal and thus see pluralism as an unvirtuous concession to social fragmentation, Bowlin argues that a certain kind of moral plurality and disagreement are unavoidable features of human creatureliness. "Human beings," he writes, "love many different goods, rank them in competing, often contrary, ways, and lead, as a result, many distinct, and at times, incompatible lives."[90] Because of this natural plurality, human creatures are in need of—indeed, their humanity comes packaged with—a capacity for negotiating difference in a way that neither expects full agreement and resolution of differences in unified consensus nor resents the inability to achieve such consensus and colloquy. This is the virtue of tolerance. According to Bowlin, tolerance is a virtue which enables us to bear objectionable difference, disagreement, and variation in judgment for the sake of the common life we share with

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[89] John R. Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), see especially chapter 2, "A Natural Virtue."

[90] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 67.

others.[91] It is a "habitual willingness," in fact, "to endure the right sorts of objectionable differences for the sake of the peaceful society and individual autonomy" we share with others, and principally for the sake of those whom we share these goods with.[92] The virtue of tolerance, in this sense, is a species of justice, for it "endures the objectionable difference of some other in order to secure for them the common good that is their due"—in this case, the goods of peace, society, and autonomy.[93] And this is precisely what distinguishes the *virtue* of tolerance from it semblances, especially the endurance of difference begrudgingly, resentfully, or on the condition that it eventually be overcome. The truly tolerant, Bowlin argues, patiently endure objectionable difference because they will the good of those tolerated, simply and absolutely, and the society and autonomy shared with them.

Bowlin's recovery of a robust account of tolerance for democratic politics is a valuable contribution to moral theology and Christian thinking about democracy and pluralism. Certainly, Bowlin is right to suggest that the contingency of the human good makes absolute unity in judgment and moral colloquy neither possible nor desirable. Natural difference, as he shows, is part and parcel of the real freedom of human agency. It is also what makes tolerance necessary. Nevertheless, it is unclear that tolerance of the sort Bowlin defends is capable of sufficiently incorporating the forms of contestation and conflictual dispute I have been arguing are critical to a vibrant, pluralist democratic politics, and for two key reasons. First, Bowlin is inhibited in this regard by his belief that

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[91] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 102. "The tolerant," Bowlin says later, "endure the objectionable differences of another in order to maintain the society they share, the peace that abides between them, and the autonomy each enjoys with respect to the differences in dispute" (118).

[92] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 126.

[93] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 126.

conflict is primarily, indeed *exclusively*, attributable to creation's fallenness. Difference, for him, is natural and fundamental, but conflict is not. As he says, "The conflicts and sorrows that accompany the diversity of human goods and loves are neither necessary nor unavoidable. They are, rather, consequences of sin."[94] Though he admits the potential for conflict was present in paradise, "that potential creates no necessity. Had Adam not sinned and humanity remained in paradise that danger would have been diffused by wise judgment" and the issuing of law to coordinate and resolve the "various incompatibilities" of the diversity of creaturely goods according to reason.[95] Here, however, Bowlin seems to undermine his argument that a true diversity and contingency of goods belong to human creatures by nature. The notion that all potential conflicts among creatures could be resolved by right use of reason and law ascribes to humans a divine-like, rather than creaturely, form of knowledge, one infinite and omniscient rather than properly contingent. Moreover, it is unclear why Bowlin feels the need to identify conflict with sin in this way, admitting only its unhappy consequences and not its potential for creativity and development. It seems, for him, there is a substantive difference between the natural multiplicity and contingency of finite goods—*conflicts* among goods, we might say—and the social reality of *conflict* between persons, which he sees primarily as a kind of alienation or enmity. But we should question such a sharp distinction between these. On the one hand, we simply cannot easily separate the clashing of particular goods, courses of action, desires, etc. from the people who embody and pursue them. On the other hand, we should resist thinking of both conflicts between

[94] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 73n.24.

[95] Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 73n.24.

goods, actions, desires, etc. and conflict between persons in exclusively negative terms. If conflict is instead seen as integral to human development and action, as I have been arguing, then one need not see conflict as an evil. Conflict, rather, can be appreciated for its capacity to generate newness, to develop what exists only in potential, and to imaginatively forge patterns of mutual relation and common life amidst difference. But Bowlin's belief in conflict's sinful origins limits his capacity to see this productive and generative goodness of conflict. In short, he refuses to ascribe contingency to creation *all the way down*, even to its essential goodness. Failing to see the fullness of conflict's goodness, his account of tolerance circumvents the possibilities of an agonistic democratic politics.

Second, while tolerance is certainly an appropriate response to *some* differences, a strong doctrine of tolerance of the kind Bowlin prescribes can encourage evasion of the necessary conflictual disputes and disagreements that are part of living together democratically. Tolerance, in other words, can too quickly give up on the possibility of *conversion*, both of self and other. As seen in the discussion of Williams above, conflictual negotiation is often a site of profound revision, reconstruction, and mediation of the self and its desires. Conflict can yield insights, perspectives, and possibilities unavailable to us apart from such negotiations. The danger of tolerance is that it can bar us from the kinds of conflict in which we and others have our desires, convictions, and hopes *changed*, and so also the possibilities for our common life. In this sense, tolerance can inhibit the kind of formation of self described above which unfolds through conflict and negotiation of difference. It can instead encourage a distancing from difference, keeping the other at arm's length rather than engaging her in the hope of conversion.

What I am retrieving from Bowlin's reading of Aquinas, the contingency of the human good, and the pluralities constitutive of our nature, then, are the insights of Bowlin's theological anthropology more than his prescriptive ethics of tolerance. Imagining alternative and more *political* ways of negotiating conflict and difference will be the task of the following chapter. Here I wish simply to affirm the invaluable insights of Bowlin's reading of Thomas and his delineation of the way difference, contingency, and disagreement are irreducible features of human being and action. Tolerance is but one possible way of addressing the conflicts and disagreements such contingency produces. Agonistic politics is another.

3.3. Embodiment

As noted above, both finitude and contingency are features of human creaturehood in part because they are entailments of creaturely *materiality*. Not all finite and contingent creatures are material—angels, for instance, are not. Yet human creatures exhibit the kind of finitude and contingency they do as distinctly material beings. Specifically, the kind of materiality possessed by living creatures like human beings is "embodiment." Moreover, as M. Shawn Copeland notes, it is precisely the body that "shapes human existence as relational and social."[96] Embodiment, in other words, is the medium of human creatures' relationality. In this section, I wish to return to the question of relation, this time through the prism of embodiment. I argued in chapter two that one of the places Augustinian postliberals and civic liberals go awry in their analogical conceptualizations of Trinitarian and human sociality is their failure to reckon with the

[96] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 2.

ways human relations are bounded by creaturely limits. Unlike the eternal perichoretic communion of the Trinity, human creatures experience relation through the medium of their bodies. And it is exactly this embodiment, and the complexities of relation, distance, and separateness that emerge from it, that is a source of conflict in creaturely social life, unlike the divine Trinity.

The importance of materiality for creaturely relation, generally speaking, and the difference from divine relation this entails, is well noted by Ian McFarland in terms of the spatiality of material creation. With respect to God, he writes, "the three hypostases are fully present to one another as Trinity…By contrast, all creatures are not immediately present to each other in this way. Instead the possibility of creatures' presence to one another is a function of place, their relative locations in space and time."[97] Indeed, that creatures occupy space with their bodies is the very "condition of the possibility for their being present to one another."[98] Proximity and distance mark the various kinds of presence and relation creatures can have to one another. Sexual intimacy, as McFarland notes, is an instance of presence with extremely close proximity, while gravitational pull is a relation often occurring across great distance.[99] In every case, however, presence and relation are, for creatures, mediated by the body. And for human creatures this is especially and wonderfully so. Embodiment mediates, and so also delimits, the forms of communion and relation human creatures are ordered to. Separateness and conflict are, I will argue, constitutive pieces of that communion. Few thinkers have appreciated this

[97] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 65.

[98] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 65.

[99] McFarland, *From Nothing*, 66.

frailty of embodied life, along with its possibilities for beauty and love, like the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. I turn now to Cavell's understanding of skepticism, separateness, and embodiment in order to suggest that, insofar as separateness is an ineliminable feature of embodied relation, conflict lingers as a possibility.

Central to Cavell's philosophical project, and his major work *The Claim of Reason* in particular, is an engagement with modern skepticism. Through a reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell argues that philosophy errs in attempting to overcome the skeptical impulse introduced by Shakespeare and Descartes, and instead must acknowledge and respond to the "truth of skepticism," something which also entails a "reinterpretation of what skepticism is, or threatens."[100] Far from an epistemological problem to be overcome, Cavell shows, skepticism emerges as a difficulty of ordinary life to be negotiated. Insofar as our common life in language is made possible by agreements, conventions, and the like, the possibility of the skeptic's questioning, doubt, contestation, and denial of this commonness and these agreements is always a "natural possibility."[101] Language-use and our attunement in language—which is to say, thought and sociality—rest on no certain foundations beyond or beneath these agreements and so are always open to failure and subject to doubt. Pragmatism and rationalism attempt, in different ways, to resolve this frailty of our common life in language by refuting skepticism and achieving certain knowledge. Cavell, on the other

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[100] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

[101] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 47. Cavell defines skepticism as "any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge," which includes not just "philosophers who wind up denying we can ever know," but also those who seek to refute them. Underlying skepticism is a "wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements" (*Claim of Reason*, 351–352).

hand, resists both refutation and capitulation to skepticism, proposing an ethics of acknowledgement capable of negotiating the ever-present threat of skepticism, both from others and in ourselves.

A critical strand of Cavell's response to the problem of skepticism concerns the body, its natural expressiveness and opacity.[102] Cavell's attention to human embodiment is at the heart not just of his response to skepticism but of his understanding of language-use more generally.[103] Put simply, speech is, for Cavell, always a bodily activity. Naturally then, Cavell shows, skepticism's frustration with the fragility of language, the inability to deliver certain knowledge regarding the world and others, extends also to the body. Skepticism is a denial of the body, Cavell says; it insists that the "body of the other seals me out" and hides the other "inside."[104] This aspect of skepticism is made especially evident in philosophical debates about "other minds," a subject Cavell addresses at several points throughout *The Claim of Reason*, often with reference to Wittgenstein's discussion of pain and pain-behavior. The skeptic, Cavell suggests, will consider a person wincing and groaning, touching her jaw, and exhibiting a red mark on her cheek to have given insufficient criteria for determining with certainty whether or not the pain of a toothache is "really there." How can I be sure, the skeptic will wonder, that the person is not feigning, rehearsing, expressing some other emotion, exhibiting what might be

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[102] See also the important discussions of language and body in Cavell in Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990), 53–90; Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 59–91; and Jônadas Techio, "Seeing Souls: Wittgenstein and Cavell on the 'Problem of Other Minds,'" *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 1 (2013): 63–84.

[103] On the influence of Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Cavell's thinking on this matter, see Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 64–65.

[104] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 427.

identified as pain-behavior but without possessing actual pain? If criteria cannot guarantee certain knowledge of the existence of something like pain, the skeptic wonders, can other sorts of criteria secure knowledge of *anything*? Cavell's response to the skeptic is to explain what criteria can and can't give us, what they are meant to show (in Cavell's terms, they can determine a thing's *identity* but not *existence*, its being *so*, not its *being* so).[105] But more importantly for my purposes, Cavell draws attention to what the skeptic's doubt reveals about his understanding of the body. It is certainly *likely*, the skeptic will admit, that the woman exhibiting all the pain-behaviors we normally identify with toothaches does in fact have the pain of a toothache. But is it certain? How can I know for sure? It seems, Cavell suggests, the skeptic will not be satisfied until criteria can show him the pain "behind" the pain behavior, beneath the bodily expression of pain. The skeptic will consider his knowledge of the toothache, however justified, still uncertain because, as Peter Dula puts it, "all that wincing and groaning don't get us to the pain itself. The pain itself is there, somewhere, but the criteria cannot reach that far. They stop at the body. We are stopped by the body."[106]

What the skeptic's dilemma reveals, Cavell sees, is a refusal to acknowledge the body's natural expressivity and our natural response to the body in pain as a legitimate form of knowledge. It is to deny our ordinary knowledge of others in favor of some other "best case" for knowing them, which is to say, a *disembodied* form a knowing, or knowing which is not mediated by and through the body. Moreover, Cavell shows, it is to refuse a kind of knowing which places one in responsive relationship to another, in this

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[105] See especially, chapter 4, "What a Thing Is (Called)," in Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 65–85.

[106] Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 123.

case a response of empathy and compassion. What the skeptic lacks is not knowledge—as if there were *more* to be known about someone in pain than their bodily expression of pain—but responsiveness and responsibility. Again, as Dula puts it, "The skeptic discovers that knowledge is not enough and so despairs. Cavell discovers that the skeptic relies on an impoverished account of knowledge and then argues that knowledge includes my responsiveness."[107] The kind of embodied relation and bodily communication involved in knowing others additionally involves what Cavell calls "letting oneself be known, waiting to be known,"[108] which demands one acknowledge one's own body as similarly expressive and make it available to be understood in its expressivity. As Cavell puts it:

> To let yourself matter is to acknowledge not merely how it is with you, and hence to acknowledge that you want the other care, at least to care to know. It is equally *to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them*. This means allowing yourself to be comprehended, something you can always deny. Not to deny it is, I would like to say, *to acknowledge your body, and the body of your expressions*, to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever *be* of you.[109]

In response to the truth of skepticism—that we cannot attain knowledge of others with certainty and so must "live our skepticism" in the form of acknowledging others—Cavell reveals the body as the site of expression and knowing.[110] In other words, embodiment is the condition for relation, of knowing another and being known by them.

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[107] Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, 124.

[108] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 459.

[109] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 383, italics mine.

[110] Cavell writes beautifully of this in terms of "reading a physiognomy," a notion he draws from Wittgenstein. "[H]uman expressions," he writes, "the human figure, to be grasped, must be *read*. To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy…I have to read the physiognomy, and see the creature according to my reading, and treat it according to my seeing. The human body is the best picture of the human soul—not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The

Inasmuch as the body is the condition of our knowing and being known—we cannot know and be known by another except by acknowledging their body and ours—the body also delimits human relation, sets the terms for how human beings can relate. In particular, the body generates distance between persons and opacity in their knowing and being known. "It is because the body reveals the self that the body conceals the self," Dula writes.[111] Not, we must add, because the body hides something of the other "inside," but rather because the body, the "field of expression of the soul," cannot be exhausted by possessive "mere knowing."[112] The body, then, is a buffer, marking the limits of knowing, forcing self and other to acknowledgment instead, demanding they yield to the distance between them. Cavell will call this aspect of relation "separateness." Separateness is the distance between embodied creatures, a distance that can be traversed but never done away with, never removed. To do so would be to transcend finitude, to obliterate the body.[113] Separateness is a fact of embodiment. Something of this truth is captured, Cavell thinks, in the notion of the body as a "veil" of the soul. Cavell rejects the dualist ideas of inner and outer, interior and exterior, this image implies but nevertheless affirms its intuition—namely, that the other is separate from me, that there is space between us. "The truth here is that we *are* separate," Cavell writes, "but not necessarily *separated* (*by* something); that we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied; each of us is

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body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is *of* the soul; it is the soul's; a human soul *has* a human body" (Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 356).

[111] Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, 81.

[112] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 356.

[113] See Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, 169, on the relationship between separateness, embodiment, and finitude, and their theological resonances in Cavell.

this one and not that, each here and not there, each now and not then."[114] Separateness is generated by the body not because it hides something—the soul, mind, etc.—but because "it essentially reveals it."[115] The issue at hand, then, is not that the other's body conceals something from me, but rather that it marks space within which relation can occur. "If something separates us, comes between us," Cavell says, it is because of a "particular *way* in which we relate, or are related (by birth, by law, by force, in love) to one another—our positions, our attitudes, with reference to one another. Call this our history. It is our present."[116] In short, separateness obtains as a necessary aspect of embodiment; it marks the space where my flesh ends and yours begins, and so also the possibility of our relation.

The other's separateness, and my responsibility to and for that separateness, is exactly what the skeptic wishes to deny, either by overcoming it or by refusing relation altogether, ceding to simple alterity. The skeptic is disappointed with the limits of embodied knowing, "as though we have, or have lost, some picture of what knowing another, or being known by another, would really come to—a harmony, a concord, a union, a transparence, a governance, a power—against which our actual successes at knowing, and being known, are poor things."[117] These descriptions of the skeptic's aspirations for knowledge in Cavell's assessment are important. They register the violence, domination, and forced unity entailed in the attempt to transcend the body in creaturely relation. We might say they describe the attempt to wrest from God a form of

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[114] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

[115] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

[116] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

[117] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 440.

communion appropriate only for the infinite. The consequence of this transgression of embodied creatureliness is the violation and destruction of the body.

Responding to the limits of human knowing and being known, Cavell suggests, is a principal theme of tragedy.[118] Cavell concludes *The Claim of Reason*, drawing together his notions of separateness, embodiment, knowing and acknowledging, with a reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*. What Shakespeare reveals in the tragedy, Cavell says, is "the body's fate under skepticism."[119] Cavell has a particular interest in Othello's obsession with Desdemona's faithfulness to him. What Iago cultivates and exacerbates in Othello, to the point of insanity, is an anxiety about Desdemona's otherness, her inability to be rendered fully transparent to him. Unless Desdemona can be fully known—which is to say, comprehended, possessed, made an object of knowledge—her fidelity cannot be guaranteed. At stake for Othello is Desdemona's separateness. "He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing," Cavell comments, "for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain."[120] Indeed, what Othello cannot accept is the great mystery of marriage, that separateness is not overcome even in union. As Cavell puts it elsewhere, in marriage "the question of two becoming one is just half the problem; the other half is how one becomes two."[121] Othello cannot accept Desdemona as separate, and his inability to acknowledge her as such drives him to a violent pursuit of knowledge, a transgression of her body.

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[118] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–6: "Tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism…an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of."

[119] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 481.

[120] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 491.

[121] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 220.

Importantly, Othello does not, cannot seriously, doubt his knowledge of Desdemona's love for him, Cavell argues. Such has been demonstrated in her embodied life with him. What Othello lacks, Cavell says, is not knowledge but acknowledgement. He simply could not yield to what he could not fail to know. And so his desire for certainty drives him to murder, to the destruction of Desdemona's body, which he can only see as an obstacle to transparency, a veil hiding her secret. His violence, his violation of Desdemona's body, seeks a knowledge more intimate than sex. Othello quite literally smothers her with his possessiveness, "on a different bed but with the same wedding sheets," a kind of twisted reenactment of their interrupted wedding night.[122] Love, intimacy, and sex are unstable forms of relation, for Othello; they expose his own dependence, call him to acknowledge his finitude, his humanness. But Othello opts instead for what Gillian Rose calls "edgeless love," love which "effaces the risk of relation: that mix of exposure and reserve, of revelation and reticence." Edgeless love "commands the complete unveiling of the eyes, the transparency of the body."[123] Its love is possession. Killing is the only act capable of fully rendering Desdemona a possession, an inanimate object of knowledge. This is the end of skepticism, Cavell shows. Finitude is interpreted as intellectual lack and certainty is pursued, quite literally, to death.

Separateness is a fact of embodiment, and *Othello* shows the dangers of responding to our separateness in denial, aspiring to a divine-like form of relation which transgresses the limits and integrity of creatures' bodies. But violence is not a necessary response to separateness. The alternative to Othello's and the skeptic's quests for

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[122] Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, 152.

[123] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 105–106.

certainty is to take responsibility for our separateness, to recognize that our commonness and separateness are mutually constitutive realities, indeed that there is *no* commonness without separateness. Tragedy reveals the same truth as Wittgenstein's famous thought experiments in private language: that "there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which language reaches; that nevertheless there is no end to our separateness. We are endlessly separate, for *no* reason."[124] And yet, we are nonetheless "answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it."[125] This is what it means to identify difference as constitutive of community, separateness as produced in and by commonness, and both as irreducible features of creatureliness. To assume responsibility for and to our separateness means, first of all, embracing the limits creatureliness imposes on our capacities for relation. The Triune persons love one another by the union of indwelling; the Triune God loves creation by incarnation, uniting flesh to Godhead in hypostatic union; human creatures attain to salvation by union with Christ and divinization in God. Each of these forms of relation entails a communion uninhibited by distance and separateness. But creatures must relate to other creatures within the limits of creaturehood, embracing distance, separateness. And just as marriages, friendships, and companionships must involve a recognition of separateness for them to survive, Cavell shows, so communities depend on the integrity of difference, the allowance of space for difference to be on its own terms. Such communities resemble what Roland Barthes saw in various "idiorrhythmic communities" throughout history which embodied "distance as

[124] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

[125] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

a value," organizing a common life without uniformity and so achieving a "socialism of distance."[126]

Second, assuming responsibility for our separateness demands a willingness to negotiate the conflicts separateness produces. To admit separateness is to admit the possibility of conflict, that my love might be unrequited, that your desires might be opposite mine, that I may be misunderstanding or misinterpreting you and you me. While these and other conflicts entail loss and involve change, they belong to the dynamic goodness of creaturely life, not its fallenness. Insofar as separateness is not a feature of sin, not a lamentable aspect of fallen humanity, but a constitutive feature of the goodness of creaturely sociality, the conflicts produced by our separateness must not be resented, even if they can be mourned. Could we not, after all, imagine heartbreak in paradise? Not as a consequence of moral failure or wrongdoing, but simply as an inevitable outworking of the conflicts produced by our multiple and varying desires and ways of realizing them, our limited and finite agency, the contingency of our goods, our separateness. What belongs to the order of sin is not conflict and separateness, but the failure of responsibility to and for that separateness. Othello was unwilling to engage Desdemona as a creature, unable to enter into a negotiation with her concerning the difficulties separateness occasions. In short, he refused marriage, refused responsibility. In this, we see conflict arise to the level of sin, as often it does. Conflicts natural to us as creatures can, and often do, materialize as violence, injustice, harm, hatred, and any number of other forms of sin and estrangement. Not all conflicts belong to creation's goodness, to be

[126] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 6, 132. See also, Corina Stan, *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 115–145.

sure; many very clearly belong to creation's corruption. The point here, however, is that there is no *necessity* to conflict's becoming so. There are ways, as Cavell puts it, of successfully "encompassing conflict" within relationality and community that allow "the continuance of personal relationships against the hard and apparently inevitable fact of misunderstanding, mutually incompatible wishes, commitments, loyalties, interests and needs."[127] Moral community is one, family another, religion a third, and so on. In the next chapter I will propose the democratic forging of common judgments as still another, and distinctly political, way of being responsible for and to our separateness. The point here is that conflicts emerge from the ordinary realities of our separateness, demanding ongoing attention and negotiation in order to sustain the relationships within which they occur.

4. Ordinary Conflict: A (Very) Brief Phenomenology

It is one thing to arrive at a theoretical account of conflict through analytical considerations of universal dimensions of human creaturehood like finitude, contingency, and embodiment. But does our common experience of conflict—in marriage, friendship, family, religious community, the workplace, etc.—disclose to us further insights about its nature, origins, or possibilities? Most basically, I suggest here, our ordinary experience of conflict reveals and substantiates what many theoretical and theological assessments of human sociality are reluctant to acknowledge: that conflict is not accidental to flourishing social relations but properly constitutive of them. Reflecting on conflict in ordinary life, that is, pushes us to see that many of the conflicts we find ourselves in have their origins not in moral error or failure, sin or misapprehension of the good, but in the simple fact of our creatureliness. Rather than being an accidental feature of those relations, or a

[127] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 269.

corruption of them, conflict often originates in the use of finite, embodied practical reason to realize the good in a world of contingency shared with others. And for this reason, I suggest, few would assert that the conflicts constitutive of relations like marriage, friendship, and other deeply intimate forms of companionship, however difficult, are simply and purely negations of those relationships. Rather, conflict, and in particular, conflict well-negotiated, is an integral and indelible feature of flourishing relations.

Consider a quite ordinary example. A married couple, call them Julie and Joseph, must decide where to live. Julie's research fellowship is nearing its completion and Joseph's consulting job has allowed him to begin working entirely from home. The couple has grown weary of living and raising their children in their large northeastern city, and a move is on the near horizon. Two possibilities emerge as most favorable: Julie has been offered a new research position in Arizona which would allow her more resources and opportunities to continue her groundbreaking cancer research than has ever been available to her. Julie has become an important emerging voice in her field, and it is clear that this appointment would not only be a smart career move but would also result in major strides in cancer research generally. Joseph's new dispensation to work remotely has made it possible for the family to leave the northeast in the first place, something he had been promised some years ago and which has since generated a longing to move to North Carolina, near Julie's parents, with whom both he and the children have become very close. Both Julie and Joseph agree that raising their children near Julie's parents, especially during the early years of their children's lives and the few years her aging parents have left, is eminently important, to say nothing of the benefit of additional

childcare, which they desperately need as working parents. Both options have clear benefits and costs, distributed differently to each spouse. Julie intensely desires the move to Arizona, an opportunity both to realize her evident skills, intelligence, and vocation and to contribute to extraordinarily important developments in cancer research that will no doubt save lives. Joseph has been pining for the move to North Carolina for years and sees the good of proximity to family as a clear priority, especially at this point in their lives. While both spouses understand the obvious benefits and costs of each option, after numerous deliberations they remain in disagreement about the most prudent decision to make. A conflict has emerged.

It is clear from this example, of which numerous analogues exist in nearly every marriage, friendship, family, and group, that conflict has emerged not from any party's moral fault, error, sin, misapprehension of the good, or even simple self-interest. Rather, conflict emerges exactly from those aspects of creaturely existence named above—that finite, embodied human creatures must realize the good and pursue their various and diverse desires and aspirations together in a world of contingency. Julie and Joseph's embodiment means, most obviously, that they cannot live in two places at the same time, at least not in the sense they clearly wish. But embodiment also figures in this conflict in a number of other ways, as well: in that Julie, Joseph, and the kids simply cannot have the same kind of relationship with Julie's parents living in Arizona that they would living near them; in that living in North Carolina would limit the material resources available to Julie in her research, occasioning more travel and time spent on research visits; in that at the heart of Julie's research aspirations is surely a deep desire to see healing for the afflicted bodies of those who suffer cancer, a desire likely generated by her own

experience watching Joseph's parents die and her embodied presence to and with them in their suffering. The difficulty of the situation is compounded by finitude. An apparent resolution to the conflict might be to spend, say, five years in Arizona before moving permanently to North Carolina, thus allowing both spouses to realize, at least in part, their conflicting wishes. But this plan must nevertheless be carried out in time, shaped by its vulnerabilities, precarities, and risks. Will Julie's parents be alive in five years? If so, what will their health conditions be? Will the children be able to have the same relationship to their grandparents then, having been more distant for their early years? What will the passage of time do to the relationships between Julie and Joseph, the couple and Julie's parents, and each to the children/grandchildren? How will each of these relationships and the persons within them change and develop over time? Is five years a sufficient amount of time to make the strides in research Julie really wishes to make? Such are the practical questions generated by consideration of finitude's conditioning of choice. Finally, it is clear that Julie and Joseph's conflict is, at bottom, a conflict generated by the contingency of the human good and their disagreement about the best possible means to realize that good within the constraints of space and time. This is to say, it is a conflict in their use of practical reason. They may discern, deliberate, seek counsel, and exchange reasons as much as they wish, but Julie and Joseph will likely never discover a clear "right" answer to their dilemma. In this moment, the genuine goods of vocation, medical advance, and family cannot be coordinated so as to fully realize each of them, nor can a theoretical "hierarchy of goods" be appealed to in order to ensure certainty in their judgment. They must exercise prudence about contingent

singulars in order to make the best judgment they can about how to best realize the good and which contingent goods to pursue, given these circumstances.

It is also important to acknowledge that what exists before Julie and Joseph is a genuine, rather than simply apparent, conflict, a situation wherein two sets of goods, desires, and goals are not fully compatible and cannot each be fully realized together. The conflict cannot be easily resolved by choosing either one of the two options, even if a general consensus and agreement can be reached eventually about which course of action to take. A number of compromises can be made, making the conflict more bearable for one or both spouses. But compromise will entail sacrifice, loss, and sorrow; it will not provide full resolution. It is nearly inevitable that one, perhaps both, of the spouses will suffer some kind of loss. The loss need not necessarily result in resentment, misery, or personal damage; it could just as well lead to transformations of desire, realizations of previously unknown aspirations and longings, or the cultivation of certain virtues and deeper love and fidelity born of sacrifice. Loss, in other words, need not necessarily terminate in simple negation; it can generate new forms of discovery, growth, and development. But it is loss nonetheless.

Situations like Julie and Joseph's reveal that conflicts between goods, desires, and actions are not simply matters of practical negotiation. They also involve deeply affective, existential, and relational dimensions and complexities. Addressing the objective conflict at hand will likely entail frustrations, sorrows, tensions, disappointments, miscommunications, and misunderstandings between Julie and Joseph. Indeed, there is simply no way to engage in deliberation and negotiation about their conflict without these complex dynamics emerging and contributing to the difficulty of

their decision-making. Julie will wonder about possible effects on her future career if she declines the job offer; she may experience anxiety about the position not turning out as expected, should the family make the move; she will fear that Joseph might resent her for so desiring this job and that her parents will not understand the opportunity she has been given; she will face uncertainty about whether she desires the research position for genuinely noble or selfish reasons. Joseph will face similar difficulties: he may feel frustrated that, finally having the opportunity to relocate to North Carolina, this long hoped for desire might go unfulfilled; he might feel Julie is failing to understand the importance of being near her parents in this time; perhaps he will wrestle with guilt over asking Julie to sacrifice a wonderful career advance. In their deliberations, they will likely, at times, speak harshly, misrepresent the other's position, fail to consider all complexities in the situation, confuse the other's disagreement with personal hostility, and more. But also, over the course of difficult late-night discussions, they will discover feelings, hopes, longings, and desires previously unknown or unspoken. Some of these they will lament, but others they will celebrate. They will apologize, express surprise, have illusions broken, undergo changes in the very desires and aspirations perpetuating the conflict in the first place. Perhaps they will discover more about themselves and each other, even grow to love each other more deeply. Conflict can occasion any number of trajectories for growth, self-knowledge, self-realization, and the cultivation of virtue. And, most importantly, conflict makes these all possible in a way unavailable to Julie and Joseph prior to, or independent of, negotiating the conflict. Years down the road, they will understand that the substance of their marriage has been defined by their negotiation

of this conflict. In many ways, they will see that their marriage simply *is* the ongoing negotiation of conflicts like these.

Finally, another critically important reality emerges from analyzing a conflict like Julie and Joseph's: the need for judgment. It is clear that, given their temporal finitude, Julie and Joseph cannot delay the final act of making a decision until full and absolute agreement and consensus is reached, resolving all lingering doubts, questions, anxieties, and concerns. At some point, their apartment lease will end, Julie's job offer will be rescinded, children will age, grandparents will die. The need for judgment is generated by finitude's constraint on human action. This, in fact, is a constraint practical reason faces in nearly every instance: finitude demands we exercise judgment without being able to fully consider every contingency and eventuality, or receive guidance from every possible source of counsel, or secure the agreement of every person affected by a decision. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it, "The practice of judgment precludes an indefinite search for insight and understanding."[128] And so a judgment must be made without arriving at certainty. On the other hand, the wise exercise of judgment surely cannot mean that one partner simply decides, with the other ceding completely to the desires of the decider, evading the difficult work of deliberation and discernment. The judgment made by the couple must, in some way, be a *common* judgment, terminating in a shared action. The dilemma they face, and that all well-negotiated conflicts face, is how to make a common judgement without full agreement. The goal of the next chapter will be to answer exactly this question.

[128] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 22.

What would a successful negotiation of Julie and Joseph's conflict look like? I have no desire to specify a particular course of action that would count as successful for Julie and Joseph—such a prescription would undermine my argument for the importance of practical reason. Julie and Joseph must come to judgment and make a decision in light of particularities and complexities of their situation that surely only they can know. What can be said is that a successful negotiation of the conflict will include, in some way, the encompassing of conflict, the recognition of loss, the preserved memory of contestation, within Julie and Joseph's relationship. Their marriage, that is, will incorporate loss and make meaning of it within the story of the couple's common life together, even after they make a decision and action. They must not forget the loss and sacrifice made but allow the memory of the conflict to live so as to preserve their decision as contingent, their judgment from becoming absolute and irreversible. Julie and Joseph will need to be able, in principle, to undo their decision, reformulate it, or reorganize its terms if it turns out to have been the wrong one or if circumstances drastically change. In such cases, they may need to improvise and alter their original decision, incorporating new realities and acknowledging new contingencies, and this depends, in part, on the memory of contestation and conflict. A successful negotiation of Julie and Joseph's conflict will entail their "tarrying with the negative," to use a term of Hegel's, attending to the lingering of conflict's negation as a reminder of judgment's final incompleteness.[129]

Julie and Joseph's conflict is ordinary. There is hardly anything surprising about its manifestation, origins, difficulties, or entailments. Conflicts such as these are commonplace in any kind of relationship in which commonness must be forged across

[129] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §32.

difference and persons' achievements of particular goods is conditioned by their shared fate with others. In short, wherever finite, embodied selves seek to realize contingent goods in a shared world with others, conflicts of this sort will arise. Marriage is perhaps a most obvious example, but friendships, families, religious communities, neighborhoods, labor unions, and numerous other forms of human sociality likewise are constituted by such conflicts. It would be strange to think political communities would be differently constituted, and most persons' ordinary experience of politics suggests conflict is as commonplace there as in any other set of relationships. The key difference with politics, I wish to suggest, is the strange supposition shared by many theorists and citizens alike that, while conflicts in marriage, for example, are perfectly ordinary, in politics they are to be avoided, managed, suppressed, or averted. But if social relations like marriage are constituted by the successful negotiation of conflict, nearly endlessly so and often in ways that generate newness, self-discovery, and deeper fidelity, then why not expect the same of politics?[130] To be sure, the differences between marital and political negotiations of conflict are significant, as are the differences between friendships, religious communities, civic bodies, labor unions, and so on. As I show in chapter five, there is a distinct shape to democratic conflict and its successful negotiation, and we must attend to the particularities of that distinctly political form of addressing conflict. Yet, if conflict is constitutive of human relation as such it should be no surprise that we find conflict and the demand to negotiate it in nearly every important set of social relations. In the following chapter, I offer an account of democratic judgment as one way in which

[130] Stanley Cavell, for one, has noted the many important ways in which attending to the conflicts and difficulties of marriage generate insights about democratic life. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

political communities might approach enduring conflict, and even suggest that political community itself can be imagined as an extended practice of conflict negotiation.

5. Conclusion

What I have attempted to sketch in this chapter is a picture of human creatureliness in which conflict arises from the goodness of our finite, contingent, and embodied existence. That we are finite, contingent, and embodied, constituted by a multiplicity of desires and a diversity of ways to realize our good, and yet equally ordered to sociality, means we cannot abandon our conflicts or retreat from difference. Our separateness demands not an ethics of alterity but of responsibility and community. We must build a common life with others amidst difference, not independent of, or even in spite of, our agonisms but through them. This activity of agonistically forging community amidst difference, what I will call a creaturely politics, is the subject of chapter five. The challenge I have set for such a vision of politics and political community in light of the argument of this chapter is to detail an account of political community that does not rest upon a commonness more fundamental to difference (a shared identity, moral colloquy, common culture, harmonious consensus, etc.). Moreover, an account of political community in which difference is constitutive of that community must also attend to the ways conflict figures as an enduring and persistent reality. My reconstruction of the notion of political community and argument for a politics of creatureliness attempt to meet both these challenges.

Yet for now I have simply been content to show how conflict has a critical place in a Christian theological anthropology. What agonistic theorists so insightfully demonstrate about the fundamental place of conflict in political life can be substantiated,

even given clarity and specificity, by a careful and analytical examination of the composition of human creatureliness. Agonistic creatures, I have argued, manifest their sociality through conflictual negotiations of their differences, an activity, I maintain, that is constitutive of their creaturely goodness. To identify conflict, the losses it entails and the transformations it eventuates, as belonging to the goodness of creaturely life is to acknowledge the dynamism of that goodness, that creatures manifest their goodness over time through change. As Luke Bretherton puts it, forging a common life amidst difference means "everyone must change, and in the process, we must all lose something to someone at some point…Loss, and therefore compromise and negotiation, are inevitable, if the flourishing of all is to take place."[131] The flourishing of the common life of creatures is attained not by overcoming conflict but through its successful ongoing negotiation. This is the substance of a creaturely politics.

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[131] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 43.

CHAPTER FIVE

Agonistic Community: Conflict and Common Judgment

1. Introduction

In 1970, just three years before his assassination and four years before the Carnation Revolution that would mark the end of Portuguese colonial rule in Africa, the Bissau-Guinean and Cape Verdean revolutionary Amílcar Cabral gave a lecture at Syracuse University. Later published under the title "National Liberation and Culture,"[1] the lecture took up the question of cultural unity and difference within the pan-African struggle for liberation. Attentive to the realities of social, cultural, and religious difference within any revolutionary struggle, and refusing to collapse these differences into a homogenous nationalist program, Cabral nevertheless acknowledged the need for strong forms of collectivity and unified action in the struggle against colonial domination. The problem facing colonized peoples, he argued, is how to marshal a collective struggle, "launched from a satisfactory base of political and moral unity," in the midst of a "multiplicity of social and ethnic groups" and forms of cultural belonging.[2] This becomes especially pressing, he says, "when, in order to face colonial violence, the liberation movement must mobilize and organize the people, under the direction of a strong and disciplined political organization."[3] When Cabral surveyed the African anti-colonial

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[1] Amílcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," in *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 39–56.

[2] Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," 53, 45.

[3] Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," 52.

movement, he saw deep difference, even as he recognized the need for sustained, radical, and collective political action. Postmodern theories of difference would be of little use to him in the face of colonial domination. The decolonial movement needed a basis for shared struggle.

In the lecture Cabral turns to an account of "culture" as a source of forging collective political resistance. In particular, he speaks of a "confluence" of particular cultures, "achieving the cultural unity of the social groups which are of key importance for the liberation struggle."[4] Appealing to notions of culture, particularly "national culture," might appear at first a reactionary and essentializing strategy. Yet what Cabral goes on to describe as the building of culture has little of the static, homogenous, and oppressive dimensions sometimes associated with political appeals to culture. Rejecting essentialist notions of race and ethnicity, as well as theories of national culture that neglect the class antagonisms within a nation, he instead speaks of culture as an achievement born of democratic struggle. Forging a political culture of liberation, he writes, entails the ability to "bring diverse interests into harmony, resolve contradictions and define common objectives."[5] In other words, culture is a form of political identification forged in the struggle for liberation. It names the set of common aspirations, ideas, and practices discovered in or created through liberative praxis. In turn, the tending of such a culture enables the ongoing capacity for organization, deliberation, and shared action. For Cabral, a culture of liberation is necessary to sustain the broad-based, popular political activity that is the long-term project of decolonization.

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[4] Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," 48.

[5] Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," 48.

Cabral's lecture grapples with a central difficulty not only of movements for liberation but also of democratic politics more generally—namely, how to forge a political community in the face of enduring conflict and difference. This is particularly the case for *pluralist* democracies. The dominant strategy of contemporary liberal theory has been to reconcile the tension of political community and difference by defining the former in a "thin" sense in order to make room for the latter. In Christian political theology, this strategy is represented by Augustinian civic liberalism, examined in chapter two. An alternative postliberal strategy for approaching this tension is seen in various communitarian theorists in political philosophy (Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer) and political theology (Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank), who propose "thick" accounts of community founded on shared commitments and fundamental agreements. I've shown the shortcomings of attempting to conceptualize political community, difference, and conflict within this liberal-communitarian binary, and so the aim of this chapter is, like Cabral, to uncover a way of thinking about political community and difference which sees the two as mutually constitutive realities. By attending to conflict as the crux of this configuration, I seek to reconstruct an account of democratic political community as dynamic and pliable, even "agonistic." In chapter three I began to sketch an account of "agonistic community" that takes conflict amidst difference to be a crucial feature of flourishing democratic life. This chapter continues that work and seeks to answer the question, "In what does agonistic community consist?" I will argue it is the activity of sharing democratic judgment and action that marks agonistic community as a form of political *community*. Agonistic community, that is, is forged in the activity of judging and acting in common.

My account of agonistic community, then, is a *non-foundationalist* one. That is, it rests not on a commonness more fundamental to difference, whether that be a shared identity, set of agreements, consensus, unified culture, etc. Rather, agonistic community is *produced* within the conflictual negotiations of difference. Politics, in this view, is not the activity of a political community. Political community is the product of politics. Or, alternatively, political community must be *constructed* politically, in particular, through common judgment and action. My approach here shares much with, and is informed by, recent theoretical considerations of political populism.[6] Rather than accept the polemical and disparaging definitions of populism given by its dismissive critics, these theorists seek to understand populism as an expression of popular power and channel populist energies for radically democratic projects. The central insight of populism is that the governing apparatus of a people tends to become unresponsive to the constituents it supposedly represents and so must be reclaimed by "the people." But just who constitutes "the people" is always up for debate and contestation. Right-wing populist movements have often constructed the identity of the people over and against the immigrant, the intellectual elite, the racial minority, etc., discovering a narrow, if fictionalized, shared identity which supposedly characterizes the "real" nation as opposed to its others (e.g. one that is white, Christian, English-speaking, etc.). Not only is this version of populism

[6] I have in mind here, particularly, Ernesto Laclau's seminal *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005); as well as Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005); Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2–16; *The New Populism: The Politics of Empowerment*, eds. Harry C. Boyte and Frank Riessman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

reactionary, exclusivist, and anti-political,[7] it embodies the kind of foundationalist impulse I seek to transcend.

But populism need not be demagogic nor foundationalist. Not only has history seen populist movements with coalitional constituencies across lines of race, class, gender, religion, and so on, but even radical democratic movements today can be described in terms of what Laura Grattan calls "aspirational democratic populism."[8] Grattan is not alone in conceptualizing contemporary grassroots democratic movements like the Industrial Areas Foundation's broad-based community organizing or William Barber's Poor People's Campaign in terms of populism.[9] Populism, for a number of theorists, helpfully conceptualizes the nature of grassroots movements like these, aimed at reclaiming and reasserting broad-based popular sovereignty.[10] One of the key features of populist movements is their attempt to construct and maintain a collective political body capable of common judgment and action—a democratic "we" that is greater than simply the aggregation of individual interests, more than the sum of its parts. "The people" is a "discursive production," in Ernesto Laclau's words.[11] But it is also the work

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[7] See Luke Bretherton, "The Political Populism of Saul Alinsky and Broad Based Organizing," *The Good Society* 21, no. 2 (2012): 261–278. Grattan refers to this kind of populism, using Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens' term, as the "phantasmal image of the organic unity" of the people, a fiction which "conceives of the people not as a collection of individuals, whose will must be mediated by interest aggregation, deliberation, or conflict resolution, but as a substantive body, bound together by ties of nature, history, or identity" (Grattan, *Populism's Power*, 23).

[8] Grattan, *Populism's Power*, 19–48.

[9] See, for instance, Bretherton, "Political Populism," 262–267; Angus Ritchie, *Inclusive Populism: Creating Citizens in the Global Age* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019); Harry C. Boyte, "Civic Populism," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 4 (2003): 737–742; Thomas Frank, *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 254–255.

[10] Chantal Mouffe, *For A Left Populism* (New York: Verso, 2018); Jorge Tamames, *For the People: Left Populism in Spain and the US* (London: Lawrence Wishart, 2020).

[11] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67–124.

of political practice, of public articulation through shared judgment and action. In this sense, Luke Bretherton contends, a "people" is "an inherently constructed and contingent form of collective political subjectivity. It takes a political process to create it."[12] Populism, as a political phenomenon, is distinguished by this effort to assemble, articulate, and mobilize a people, a "we" who acts. My account of agonistic community in what follows draws on this populist insight that political community is *produced* rather than *discovered*. As such, it is always contestable and open to reconfiguration. Yet it exists as a collectivity, or community, insofar as it is able to yield common judgment and action.

The goal of this chapter is to sketch the contours of agonistic community. Agonistic community, I will argue, is grounded in a vision of politics as a creaturely practice, is constituted by the exchanges and negotiations of difference and conflict, and has as its principal act the exercising of shared democratic judgment. Indeed, judgment is the key theme of the chapter, and I will contend that common judgment amidst difference is the central feature of agonistic community. I develop this argument in several stages. First, I show that judgment is the constitutive activity of political communities as such. In section two, I make use of the political theories of Althusius and Yves Simon, examples of what I call a "creaturely politics," to show how political communities are dynamic formations, comprised of a diversity of interests and constituents, and thus in need of capacities for negotiating these differences in common judgment and action. Judgment, I argue, mediates the pluralism of democratic difference and the common action of democratic agency. It is the heart of democratic community. In section three, I detail the

[12] Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 425.

nature of political judgment, first in general, as the characteristic act of political community, and second, as a distinctively democratic form of action, what I will call, following Linda Zerilli, a "democratic theory of judgment." In doing so, I argue against certain patterns of liberal theory which take the problem of judgment to be about adjudicating various value systems in order to establish neutral criteria for administering shared judgment, and instead attend to judgment as a practice of bringing an object into view as a common object of judgment. Judgment in this sense is as much an affective practice as it is a process of exchanging and evaluating reasons, and a deeply conflictual and agonistic one, at that. Section four serves as the real heart of the chapter, as it reflects on what I consider to be an exemplary form of agonistic community: the Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, a radically democratic movement of broad-based community organizing. My analysis of the IAF's organizing practices focuses on the place of conflict in coming to democratic judgment, showing the ways judgment, and so democratic community, are inescapably agonistic. Political formations like the IAF, I argue, exemplify the ways conflict can be generative and productive of flourishing democratic community.

2. Creaturely Politics: Althusius, Simon, and the Politics of Common Action

If indeed difference and the conflicts it generates belong properly to human creatures in their created goodness, as I argued in the previous chapter, this must be coordinated to an equally fundamental theological anthropological claim: human creatures are nonetheless inherently social creatures, possessing natural capacities for

association. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it, human creatures are "helplessly social."[13] The suggestion that human persons are not just social beings but also naturally political animals is as old as Aristotle.[14] Yet a distinct tradition of Christian political thought, owing its source, in part, to the early-modern Calvinist political philosopher Johannes Althusius, pursues this insight in a distinctly theological direction. "Consociationalism," as Luke Bretherton refers to it, is grounded in a theology of creaturehood and "emerges out of reflection on the rich scriptural and theological motif of covenant and how this generates conceptions of federalism."[15] While the dominant strains of late medieval and early modern political thought were preoccupied with theorizing political sovereignty in terms of its divine analogue, Althusius began his theory of politics by attending to the nature of creaturely relation, seeing the political as "an assemblage that emerges through and is grounded upon a process of mutual communication between covenantal associations and their reciprocal pursuit of common goods."[16] Thus, grounding his political theory in an account of the human creature, he arrives at a vision of political society as constituted by multiple overlapping forms of association, a distribution of authority to a plurality of civic and social bodies, and a "vesting [of] sovereignty…in the webs of relations that shape the possibilities for agency across a body politic."[17]

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[13] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 55.

[14] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 1252[a] 24–1253[a] 38.

[15] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life,* 390.

[16] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 391.

[17] Robert Latham, "Social Sovereignty," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 4 (2000): 6, quoted in Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life*, 391n.80. Bretherton draws attention to Latham's crucial recognition that, while Althusius is surely to be credited as one of the most important early formulators of

Althusius represents, I suggest, an approach to the political that privileges theological anthropology as its central category. His is a "creaturely politics," and one that presumes an account of the human creature similar to the one I developed in chapter four. I turn to Althusius in this section in order to further elucidate this theological anthropological basis of a creaturely politics, and then supplement his insights with others culled from Yves Simon, a more contemporary theorist of democratic politics. In doing so, I aim to arrive at a picture of the human creature that sees both difference and association, conflict and its mediations, as basic to creaturely sociality. For such a creature, "politics" will be a capacity to negotiate conflict in the formation of a common life with others.

2.1. Consociatio *and the Politics of Creaturely Association*

Althusius begins his *Politica*, a comprehensive and systematic treatment of political order, with the following summary definition of the activity of politics: "Politics is the art of associating (*consociandi*) men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them."[18] Politics, Althusius says, is a matter of "symbiotics," or living together, and thus the primary subject matter of politics is *consociatio*, or association.[19] Rather than a product of contractual agreement, association is primarily a natural phenomenon. The human creature, he observes, "is by nature a civil

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notions of popular sovereignty, sovereignty was, for him, always mediated by the multiplicity of associational forms constituting society, rather than a simple collective body of individuals.

[18] Johannes Althusius, *Politica*, ed. and trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), 17. For Althusius, politics and social life are distinguished but intimately related, the former existing to uphold the latter. In this way, he represents a kind of synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian approaches to the political.

[19] Althusius, *Politica*, 17.

animal who strives eagerly for association."[20] But unlike Aristotle, Althusius does not arrive at this conclusion by way of reflection on the human person's rational capacities. Instead, it is an entailment of God's creation of humanity with natural difference. Human creatures, Althusius contends, possess a variety of skills, capacities, desires, and powers, each distributed according to divine providence. God "did not give all things to one person," he writes, "but some to one and some to others, so that you have need for my gifts, and I for yours. And so was born, as it were, the need for communicating necessary and useful things."[21] This *communicatio*, mutual communication, or sharing of "things, services, and right (*jus*)" is the material of political association; its efficient cause is "consent and agreement among the communicating citizens"[22]; and its final cause is the flourishing of a "common life."[23] For Althusius, the political community is constituted by a plurality of these associational forms, each possessing a degree of authority and autonomy in its own affairs, and each contributing to the flourishing of the polity. Association is preserved by formal or implicit covenant, in which is specified the purposes, common goods, and means to pursue those common goods that constitute the association. Finally, the political community as a whole exists by covenantal federation of these varying forms of association in pursuit of the common good.[24]

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[20] Althusius, *Politica*, 25.

[21] Althusius, *Politica*, 23.

[22] Althusius, *Politica*, 24.

[23] Althusius, *Politica*, 19.

[24] The pluralist theories of state articulated by theorist like Otto von Gierke and J.N. Figgis, as well as the "guild socialism" of thinkers like G.D.H. Cole and Harold Laski, can be seen as inheritors of this consociational construal of sovereignty. See Cécile Laborde, *Pluralist Thought and the State in Britain and France, 1900–25* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), and Paul Q. Hirst, "Introduction," in *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G.D.H. Cole, J.N. Figgis, and H.J. Laski*, ed. Paul Q. Hirst (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–46.

At bottom, for Althusius, politics is the activity by which human creatures communicate "necessary and useful things" across their differences in the pursuit of a common life together. In this way, Althusius' creaturely politics is attentive to practices of negotiation and exchange as the real heart of political life. A politics of association is premised on a view of human creatures as both naturally different and sociable, and political community as founded upon the natural capacities creatures have for negotiating their differences and ordering them to the common life by way of *communicatio*. In terms of the previous chapter, his politics presumes a picture of human persons as finite, contingent, and embodied creatures, beings who pursue various goods and courses of action, some of which are incompatible and in conflict with others. Creatures are thus in need of a means of coordinating these differences and mediating these conflicts in their common life, and this is the task of politics.

To be sure, Althusius' vision of the differentiated body politic is one which emphasizes the harmonization of difference and the achievement of concord among its various constituents. For him, successful political order is marked by the smooth operations of a body unified in difference, and conflict has no positive role. Indeed, his conceptualization of the polity in terms of the metaphor of the human body, and his elucidation of the distinct hierarchies composing that body, confirm the legitimate worries of critics of political community. As with Milbank, it seems difference, for him, must be hierarchically managed in order to be harmonized. Nevertheless, Althusius' important insight that political community is rooted in and founded upon the dynamic processes of natural association and communication can be developed in more egalitarian

and democratic directions. To do so, I turn to the twentieth-century Catholic political philosopher Yves Simon.

2.2. Common Action and Democratic Political Community

Though Simon writes out of a much different tradition of political thought than Althusius, he shares with Althusius a desire to ground political philosophical reflection in an account of the human creature as finite, social, and constituted by natural difference. Yet, rather than advocating for the complete harmonization of difference within the unified body politic, a static and hierarchical vision of political community, Simon develops an account of democratic community with a more dynamic center: the capacity for "common action."[25] For Simon, democratic political community is less about the possession of a shared moral, religious, or cultural foundation upon which to conduct political activity; it resides instead in a people's capacity to forge shared judgment and action amidst difference. In this way, Simon aids in the move beyond a foundationalist account of political community and toward a more fluid and dynamic democratic one.

According to Simon, even the most ideal, wise, and virtuous human community is in need of political coordination. This is because the activity of politics, of coordinating persons' pursuits of various goods and their common pursuit of others, arises not out of any deficiency of human nature, but rather from the multiplicity and diversity of its goodness. As Vukan Kuic notes of Simon's theory of democratic authority, "[A]uthority springs not so much from what a community might lack as from the good things it already has and still might achieve. Rather than penury, it is really plenitude, material,

[25] Yves R. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 31–33.

intellectual, spiritual, that calls for the operation of political authority."[26] In other words, politics, for Simon, arises out of the need to form commonness of judgment and action amidst the multitude of possible ways of pursuing the good for a political community. With so many "diverse ways leading to the common good" and such a great "variety of preferences" for pursuing particular goods in society with others, Simon notes, some are tempted to suppose that this diversity is somehow due to ignorance or misapprehension of the good. "A stubborn objection holds," he writes, "that if men were omniscient, unanimous adherence to the end would necessarily entail unanimity regarding the means."[27] But exactly the opposite is the case. With greater knowledge and goodness, a society actually discovers *more* possible ways of realizing the good, conflicts between persons about which particular means is most appropriate to do so, and thus an even greater need for coordination and deliberation in its common life.[28] We might say that goodness and conflict here are actually indexed one to the other—more profound knowledge of the good produces more disagreements about the numerous ways to achieve it. An insistence on unanimity regarding the means to realize the good, when in fact those means are multiple and diverse, "expresses an aversion to the mystery involved in free choice as well as to the darkness of contingency."[29] Politics belongs to this domain of freedom and contingency, which is to say, practical reason, and so to insist on a singular course of action as necessary and inevitable eschews the contingency and conflictual deliberation entailed in practical reasoning about the good.

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[26] Vukan Kuic, "Introduction," in Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 7.

[27] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 45.

[28] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 45.

[29] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 42.

There are many goods and many ways to realize the good. This is not to be lamented. Nevertheless, Simon argues, a people must discover ways to coordinate these goods and their pursuits of them, as well as forge patterns of common action in order to achieve the good together. Without such negotiation and common action, a people exists as individuals living in proximity to one another, but not anything approaching a community, nor anything distinctly *political*. Common action involves the choosing of one particular means among the many legitimate ones to realize the good together. Whether we drive on the left side of the road or the right makes relatively little difference, but the success of our common life depends on our common action in choosing one, thus realizing the good of public safety. The capacity to choose and so command obedience to the decision of common action—the causal power of common action, as Simon calls it[30]—is democratic authority. Democratic authority is necessary given the plurality of means to realize the good: "a problem of united action which cannot be solved by way of unanimity should be solved by way of authority."[31] Whether authority here is identified with an elected body, a representative, or a popular vote does not matter, only that there is a capacity to command common action.[32]

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[30] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 32.

[31] Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Governance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 30.

[32] On Simon's account of democratic authority, see Jordan L. Hylden, "Civic Democracy and Catholic Authority in Conflict? Yves Simon's Thomist Democratic Authority," PhD diss., Duke University, 2019, 209–247.

The most helpful metaphor that captures Simon's conceptualization of the relationship between plurality, authority, and common action is the symphony.[33] The central function of the conductor's authority in a symphonic performance is to enable and facilitate a common action amidst difference. It is the capacity to perform coordinated action that makes an orchestra the kind of community it is. The ground or basis of its being a community is this shared action, along with the shared judgments, commitments, and pragmatic agreements necessary to carry it out. But importantly, the orchestral community is not founded upon a shared identity, common culture, or substantial set of agreements about the final ends of musical performance, standards of taste, questions of ultimate truth, etc. Each member belongs to the symphonic community as an agent desiring the good of common action, and the flourishing of the community depends upon its ability to perform this common action in such a way that each member participates fully in the action.

In Simon's account of democratic political community, then, we see the convergence of several important themes from the previous chapter: the diversity of goods and means to realize the good as arising from creatures' natural difference; the need to negotiate this difference democratically in order to realize a common life; and the basis of this common life resting on the determination and performance of common action. In light of the previous chapter, we might say that democratic political community consists in the ability to generate common action amidst a multiplicity of differences and the conflicts these differences eventuate. Simon speaks little of conflict itself, nor does he

[33] Here, I follow Victor Lee Austin, *Up With Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 16–19, who extends Simon's account of authority through this metaphor.

acknowledge any positive, generative qualities in it; his vision of democratic political community tends instead to focus on the capacity of democratically accountable authorities to manage and direct the coordination of common action amidst difference. His political theory is democratic, but not radically so. Later on, I will delineate the important ways in which conflict figures into broad-based, participatory deliberations regarding common action, suggesting the negotiation of conflict is indispensable to producing and sustaining them. For now, I only wish to appreciate Simon's discernment of common action as the substantive heart of political community. Perhaps even more importantly, however, Simon also identifies the requisite condition of common action and thus the very possibility of democratic political community: the capacity to arrive at shared judgments.

Simon puts it succinctly: "[U]nity of action depends upon unity of judgment."[34] If a political community is to act in common, it must possess common judgment. If it is to endure beyond a single action, an ephemeral, spontaneous moment of commonness, it must possess the capacity to judge in common in an ongoing way. Democratic communities are built so as to withstand any number of disagreements in deliberation, but for it to exist as a deliberating community at all, Simon recognizes, it must share certain capacities to make judgments together over time.[35] Otherwise deliberation is conducted endlessly without terminating in action, or action is carried out in the name of the community but is not shared or legitimated. Judgment is the act by which a community moves from the plurality of natural difference to the singularity of common action. Yet,

[34] Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 19.

[35] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 32.

Simon is quick to note, we should not be optimistic about the possibilities of achieving rational consensus or full unanimity in deliberation before judgment is made. "Unanimity is a precarious principle," he notes.[36] Nor can "unity of judgment…be procured by rational communication."[37] Common judgment is secured not by rational consensus or procedural agreement, as in Rawlsian liberalism and Habermasian deliberative democracy, but by what Simon calls "affective communion."[38] Affect, here, refers less to emotion or passion and more to the intuitive knowledge characteristic of the practical intellect, the "desires and aversions born of rational apprehension."[39] Affect, in other words, belongs to the appetitive faculty. Politics, no less than ethics, depends on the appetites in the exercise of judgment.[40] Judgment is about desire ordered to wisdom, the operations of love.

This is to be expected. If judgment is fundamentally an activity of practical reason, as all politics ultimately is, then theoretical knowledge is insufficient for its act. Hence, in developing the notion of affective communion, Simon turns to familiar categories in moral philosophy associated with practical judgment: "inclination," "the heart," "sentiment," "the appetite," "the will."[41] This is the stuff of political judgment, not mere abstract, technical, or theoretical knowledge. So, Simon says, "the way of inclination alone can procure an answer when a question of human conduct involves

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[36] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 40.

[37] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 32.

[38] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 33.

[39] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 34–35n.6.

[40] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 37.

[41] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 33–37.

contingency."[42] In all of this, Simon is shown to be a realist about the extent of disagreement and difference in democratic politics; it cannot be overcome or resolved by rational means. Yet he refuses to appeal to liberal notions of tolerance that might circumvent the enduring need for yielding common judgment and thus common action. That common judgment cannot be reached by means of rational certainty, in other words, does not absolve us of the need to judge. So Simon's turn to affective communion is an attempt to conceptualize the kind of commonness necessary to generate common judgment in the face of disagreement.

This is as far as I wish to go with Simon. His exact delineation of how affective communion is achieved is less persuasive, in my view, than his more general argument for the necessity of a kind of common capacity for judgment amidst pluralism and difference. I will turn to other resources for my own account of affect and judgment. But Simon identifies the critical question of judgment that I take up in the rest of this chapter: how can judgment be shared, genuinely democratic, amidst difference without the promise of rational consensus? Does an *agonistic* community, in other words, have any hope for achieving common judgment and thus shared action?

3. Common Judgment and Political Community

Political judgment is the act whereby a collection of people constituted by pluralism and difference are moved to unified action as a political *community*. Judgement is the heart of political community. But what is the structure of this act? And what is the nature of political judgment construed in distinctly democratic terms? Is such an act possible, or are common judgment and democratic pluralism fundamentally at odds with

[42] Simon, *General Theory of Authority*, 37.

one another, making something like political community altogether impossible for pluralist democracy? The aim of this section is to develop a democratic theory of common judgment capable of sustaining the kind of common action described above. Agonistic community, I argue, is constituted by the ability to make common judgments amidst conflict and difference without effacing difference or transcending conflict. Here, I consider first the act of political judgment itself and then move to thematize this activity in terms of agonistic democratic practice.

3.1. The Act of Political Judgment

Judgment is the consummate political act because politics involves the operations of *phronesis*, or practical reason. As Luke Bretherton notes, politics cannot be reduced to questions of *episteme*, for "politics is always particular and contextual," nor carried out by mere *techne*, for politics "always concerns questions of morality and ends rather than simply questions of technique or skill."[43] *Phronesis* regards the capacity to act in contingent circumstances of time and place, to choose specific means in order to realize specific ends. Politics demands the use of *phronesis* in order to discern the appropriate action or set of actions needed for a specific people in a determinate space and time, terminating in judgment and action. As such, the political judgments generated by *phronesis* are necessarily contingent ones, incapable of rational certainty or universality, but nevertheless not arbitrary or relativistic.[44] Ideally, they are wise judgments.

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[43] Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 193. A similar argument for practical reason, construed in terms of *metis* rather than *phronesis*, is made in James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 309–341.

[44] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 192.

That politics is chiefly about practical judgment was a perspective widely shared among classical political thinkers and explicated with precision by Aristotle.[45] Medieval and early modern political philosophy continued this emphasis on judgment, especially in the genre of writing known as *specula principum*, or "mirrors for princes." With the increasing bureaucratization of the modern nation-state and professionalization of its administrative apparatus, judgment gradually fell out of favor as a central subject of concern for increasingly rationalist political philosophies and technocratic governing strategies.[46] It was Hannah Arendt who, in the wake of the twentieth century's banalities of evil, recovered the importance of judgment for political theorizing, a remarkable feat given that her planned treatment of judgment in the final third book of *The Life of the Mind* was never completed, leaving us only her brilliant interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.[47] Arendt's incomplete endeavor to give a systematic treatment of political judgment nevertheless resulted in a revival of interest in continuing that work, endeavoring to recenter judgment in contemporary political theory and democratic theory in particular.[48] My account of democratic judgment here is inspired by Arendt and the tradition she initiated.

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[45] See the discussion of Aristotle, *phronesis*, and judgment in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999), 312–324.

[46] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 25–31.

[47] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[48] Just a few important examples, though many more could be mentioned: Richard J. Bernstein, "Responsibility, Judging, and Evil," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 208 (1999): 155–172; Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging," in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 89–156; Linda M.G. Zerilli, "'We Feel Our Freedom': Imagination and Judgment in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 158–188; David L. Marshall, "The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt's Theory of Judgment," *Political Theory* 38, no. 3 (2010): 367–393; Maurizio Passerin

Judgment, as Ronald Beiner points out, is performed in nearly "every contact we have with the political world," from reading the daily newspaper, to discussing and debating politics with friends and family, to acting as citizens or officials in civic capacities.[49] Its ubiquity makes it notoriously difficult to define. As Beiner notes, while political judgment is discussed in passing in nearly every great work of political philosophy, being presupposed in discussions of basic political concepts like rights, freedom, justice, power, authority, etc., it has hardly ever been given the systematic treatment these other concepts have received.[50] Nevertheless, I proceed here with the following understanding of judgment as a political act, following Beiner: political judgment is the capacity to evaluate and appraise particulars, without recourse to rules or certainty, and issue a determination.[51] Judgment concerns things both retrospective and prospective, pronouncing on things past ("This policy was unjust"; "The defendant is guilty of the crime") or determining a specific course of action for the future (setting a tax rate, declaring war, passing a spending budget). Often, perhaps most of the time, these retrospective and prospective aspects of judgment converge. So, for instance, when

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D'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245–260.

[49] Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 8.

[50] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 4–5.

[51] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 8. See also, Peter J. Steinberger, *The Concept of Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Kant defined judgment in general in his third *Critique* as "the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal." He then distinguishes between "determinative" and "reflective" judgment, the former which begins with a given universal concept or rule and reasons to a particular and the latter which begins with a particular and reasons toward a universal not given. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15. Political judgment is a form of reflective judgment, in this framing, though, as will be clear, I depart in significant ways from Kant who thinks of reflective judgment in primarily individual and aesthetic, rather than social and political, ways.

Oliver O'Donovan argues that judgment is, by its nature, always reactive, "pronounc[ing] upon a preceding act" and "speak[ing] about something that already is the case," he nevertheless is clear that doing so "clears space prospectively" for action to be performed by the political community.[52] The judgment that a particular policy is unfairly discriminating, for example, implies a prescription that it should be remedied. My attention here is primarily on the prospective nature of judgment, and this in keeping with my focus on politics as the domain of practical reasoning about the good and how to accomplish it. Judgment, in this frame, joins prudential thinking and action. It is the determination of what to do.

Clearly, however, judgment has additional theological dimensions, especially in Christianity. As O'Donovan summarizes the basic insight of Christian scripture and tradition regarding government, "The authority of government resides *essentially* in the act of judgment."[53] From Israel's political experience under judges and kings, to the teaching of St. Paul, to Jewish and Christian reflection on the paradigm examples of political authority, Moses and David, the principal responsibility and activity of governing is discerned to be judgment. Importantly, this is a constraining and deflationist interpretation of political authority, for "it strips down the role of government to the single task of judgment, and forbids human rule to pretend to sovereignty."[54] Governing-as-judgment is the basis, then, of theological critiques of idolatry and imperialism, warnings against complete identification of a people with the apparatus of political rule,

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[52] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 8–9.

[53] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 4.

[54] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 4.

and resistance to totalitarian aspirations to seize government as means of salvific action. To theologize political authority in terms of judgment, O'Donovan shows, is to invest it with the simple task of "enacting right against wrong."[55] In this sense, governing is primarily ordered to justice, for, as Aquinas rightly notes, judgment is the "act of justice."[56]

Moreover, to conceptualize judgment theologically as the chief act of political authority is, importantly, to place upon it certain limits and acknowledge its imperfectability. Unlike divine judgment, O'Donovan explains, political judgment regards only particular matters (matters of public concern), has a limited power ("it commands only the same resources for exertion as any other human action does"), and lacks transcendent, final authority.[57] It is this third constraint that is of particular importance for my purposes here, for it is precisely the character of judgment as lacking finality that occasions the possibility of contestation and revision—that is, conflict. Because political judgment is subject to the final, transcendent judgment of God, it is always open to critique, reform, even refusal, in prophetic resistance and obedience to the One who judges both the living and the dead.

This crucially important dimension of judgment's imperfectability returns us to the matter of judgment's particular nature as practical, rather than theoretical. Because judgment concerns things contingent and singular, a judgment cannot be deduced from universals, rules, or absolutes. Instead, it "appeals to those judging persons 'present',

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[55] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 5.

[56] *ST* II-II.60.1, quoted in O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 6.

[57] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, 28–29.

those who are members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear."[58] It substantiates itself by means of persuasion rather than proof, as Arendt notes, and in doing so it arises from and refers to the *sensus communis*, the common sense of an ordinary world shared with others.[59] Stanley Cavell thus speaks of judgment as the attempt to "speak for" a community, to stake oneself as representative of others and so elicit either their agreement or disapproval.[60] In this sense, a judgment's ground is subjective, but its reach is universal—what Kant called "subjective universality."[61] More will be said about this appeal to the *sensus communis* that governs judgment below, for it is precisely judgment's embeddedness in the ordinary that invites reflection upon its democratic possibilities.[62]

Finally, what is it that makes political judgment *political*? On the one hand, it might appear that political judgment is simply the activity of judgment extended to matters of political concern. A judgment is political insofar as its object is political. This understanding is common among a prominent strand of Kantianism, as Benjamin Barber has pointed out, in which "political judgment [is] simply one kind of judgment" among

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[58] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 16.

[59] See Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 218. See also, Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, 223–259.

[60] See Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 73–96. See also, Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 28–36.

[61] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 43.

[62] My account of democratic judgment and agonistic community has much in common with Sandra Laugier's theorization of radical democracy in terms of ordinary language philosophy. See Sandra Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 217–240; Sandra Laugier, "This Is Us: Wittgenstein and the Social," *Philosophical Investigations* 41, no. 2 (2018): 204–222; and Albert Ogien and Sandra Laugier, *Pourquoi désobéir en démocratie?* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2010).

others (moral, aesthetic, etc.), "namely, the judgment of things political."[63] But, as Barber and others have argued, this fails to appreciate the unique circumstances, contexts, and practices within which political judgment is produced, configuring the nature of judgment as political *in form*. As Barber writes, political judgment is constituted by "common civic activity"; it "proceeds from solitude to sociability"; and it is, in fact, politics which produces judgment, not judgment politics.[64] In other words, political judgment is judgment *arrived at politically*, through collective deliberation and reasoning. It is not capable of being rendered privately, and even when a singular person or institution claims to be exercising judgment on her or its own, she or it does so as one representing others. To make political judgment, to judge in a political form, as Linda Zerilli notes, thus entails a kind of "representative thinking," what Arendt calls "thinking in the place of everybody else," wherein one reasons not by appeal to private commitments, universal criteria, or known rules, but by entering into a negotiation with others in order to first bring an object into view and then deliberate about it.[65]

To sum up: political judgment is the distinguishing act of a political community, for it is the act which moves a community from the plurality of its differences to the singularity of a common action. Political judgment is a community's appraisal of a particular, be that a circumstance, law, dilemma, future course of action, etc., by which it makes a determination issuing from practical reason. Finally, political judgments are justified or legitimated insofar as they are political in form—that is, they arise from and

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[63] Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 197.

[64] Barber, *The Conquest of Politics*, 199.

[65] Linda M.G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 7.

represent the political community as a whole. But this raises an acute dilemma for pluralist democratic communities: How can shared judgment be reached amidst significant disagreements of value and competing visions of the good, especially where there exist no certain and universal criteria by which to adjudicate these differences? Can a judgment be both reasonable and legitimate under the conditions of democratic pluralism? If so, how? We must turn, then, to think about the specifically *democratic* nature of judgment.

3.2. A Democratic Theory of Judgment

The key concern of a democratic theory of judgment, and thus also of my account of judgment as the principal mark of an agonistic democratic community, is to show how shared judgment is possible amidst disagreement and difference without resorting to universal criteria or rules for adjudicating those disagreements and differences. As I argued in chapter two, positing such a common measure more fundamental than difference risks effacing difference, legitimating non-democratic measures of managing difference, and ultimately obscuring the place of conflict and contestation in democratic politics. Thus, relatedly, a democratic theory of judgment must show not only how conflict amidst difference does not inhibit the process of coming to judgment but actually constitutes it as democratic. We will be aided in developing such an account by considering the important arguments made by Linda Zerilli in her 2016 book *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*. Though Zerilli does not take up the question of conflict directly, her work is concerned with many of the same challenges of democracy, pluralism, and difference that figure in this dissertation, making her insights valuable and fecund.

Zerilli states the challenge of developing a theory of judgment for democratic pluralism as follows: "A democratic theory of judgment must be more than a theory of normative justification or the adjudication of different perspectives. It must be a world-building practice of freedom rooted in the plurality of perspectives that alone facilitates our capacity to count as real, as part of the common world, what is real."[66] Several key elements of democratic judgment are operative in this summary formulation and worth attending to. First, in contrast to much contemporary liberal theory, Zerilli does not see the goal of a theory of judgment to be the elucidation of principles or criteria for settling disputes amidst value differences or competing sets of commitments, fundamental beliefs, comprehensive doctrines, or moral and philosophical orientations. This approach begins with a picture of persons as siloed by their incommensurable comprehensive doctrines and fundamental commitments and sees political judgment as legitimate only when licensed by neutral principles all parties can assent to. It is the approach of neo-Kantian liberals like John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas. Both develop various iterations of an account of public reason, a set of criteria for determining and evaluating what may count as legitimate democratic rationality, in order to "forestall irreconcilable political conflict and decisionism."[67] Such "reasonableness," as Rawls terms it, is able to guarantee shared judgment insofar as arguments can proceed from neutral principals that all reasonable citizens share to the particular contingencies of political life.

Like my account here, the ability to share judgment is also at the heart of Rawls' understanding of democratic political community. For Rawls, however, the essence of

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[66] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, xv.

[67] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 2.

political community amidst moral, religious, and cultural diversity, what he calls "social unity," resides in a shared overlapping consensus regarding normative principles of political justice.[68] Rawls rejects strong, communitarian notions of political community grounded in a single shared comprehensive doctrine and prizes pluralism and difference as critical features of a flourishing democratic society. Nonetheless, he believes a careful investigation of those incommensurable comprehensive doctrines comprising pluralist society will reveal a fundamental set of pragmatic principles regarding basic justice capable of adjudicating differences between persons. Something more fundamental than difference—namely, a set of universal commitments—is the foundation of political community. Judgments must be reached, and so an external basis for those judgments is established, not in metaphysical, moral, or religious terms, but in pragmatic political ones. For Rawls, in other words, the problem of democratic judgment is one of finding neutral criteria to adjudicate difference, achieve consensus, and forestall conflict.

Zerilli contrasts this approach to the problem of democratic judgment with Hannah Arendt's. Arendt, she shows, shares Rawls' zeal for a plural social sphere as critical for a genuinely democratic public life, but not his appeal to external criteria like standards of public reason as a means of adjudicating difference. Instead, for Arendt, pluralist politics is about the capacity to build a "common world" in which judgment can occur. This is the second important element of Zerilli's formulation of democratic judgment. Judgment appeals not to supposed neutral, universal criteria, rules, or

[68] John Rawls, "Social Unity and Primary Goods," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 159–185. See also John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (1981): 1–25. For a critical analysis of Rawls' understanding of political community, see James W. Nickel, "Rawls on Political Community and Principles of Justice," *Law and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1990): 205–216.

fundamental beliefs for its validation, but rather to a common world that persons inhabit linguistically, conceptually, and practically. Judgment, that is, appeals to the ordinary for its legitimacy. Arendt's notion of a common world is markedly different from Rawls' overlapping consensus, which sets the parameters for democratic argument and the criteria for determining judgment before any deliberation has begun. Arendt is concerned less with formal criteria to ground judgment and more with the social practices and forms of life inside of which democratic judgment can occur. While Rawls seeks a commonness beneath, and more fundamental to, difference, Arendt's common world is "a public space that is created *out of* the public expression of the plurality of comprehensive doctrines. The common world is 'the space in which things become public'."[69] In other words, for Arendt and Zerilli, the means or criteria for judging are not available to us except through the actual practice of asking and giving reasons; the capacity to yield shared judgment comes after and through democratic engagement amidst difference. Indeed, a key point of Arendt's is that judgment is only possible where there exists a rich and active public sphere, a space of exchange and argument amidst difference.

Moreover, the very objects of political judgment we seek, Zerilli argues, are not even perceivable save through this practice of building a common world. This is the third important piece of Zerilli's formulation: judgment regards the capacity to *see* an object in common. Zerilli speaks of this in terms of an object of judgment "coming into view." A common world is one in which "the sameness of an object" can appear to all members; an object can come into view as a *common object* of judgment.[70] This is perhaps the most

[69] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 160, emphasis mine.

[70] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 34, 265. Arendt develops this with respect to Socrates' notion of *doxa*, or "opinion." For him, she writes, the "assumption was that the world opens up differently

significant aspect of Zerilli's account of democratic judgment and what marks hers as notably different from traditional theories of moral judgment. Rather than construing judgment as an activity in which a person or group considers a definite "object" and then applies a "concept" to assess it, Zerilli sees objectivity—the apprehension of an object—not as a given but as an *achievement*. Part of the activity of democratic judgment, in other words, is coming to actually *see* an object and see it *in common* with others. We can appreciate this difference by considering Alice Crary's criticism of traditional conceptions of moral judgment and her alternative account of moral judgment in terms of vision. According to Crary, moral judgments are most often "understood as judgments that apply some moral concept or other" to an object (a dilemma, an action, a person, etc.).[71] In this case, a value-neutral object exists, and it is the task of the moral agent to apply one of the many concepts supposedly peculiar to morality ("good," "bad," "duty," "just," "selfish," etc.) to that object so as to make a moral determination about it. Such a picture of moral thinking, Crary argues, imagines the human person as existing "outside" of ethics, an observer who applies value-descriptions to objects as they are in the world, apart from their appearance to her.[72]

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to every man, according to his position in it; and that the 'sameness' of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, common to all) or 'objectivity' (as we would say from the subjective view point of modern philosophy) resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world—and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)—both you and I are human." See Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 80.

[71] Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1, 9.

[72] Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 10–35.

There are two chief problems with this picture, Crary argues. First, it imagines that the whole of moral thinking consists in the activity of making judgments—again, understood as the application of concepts. Crary wants instead to move ethical thinking "beyond moral judgment to the whole sensibilities characteristic of individuals as language users," which includes affect, emotion, vision, imagination, etc.[73] Second, and relatedly, if moral thinking extends beyond simple judgment-making, then moral life and moral concepts cannot be easily separated from those other supposedly "non-moral" aspects of our ordinary life in language. Crary's account of moral thinking, then, is one "that expands the concerns of ethics so that, far from being limited to a person's moral judgments, they encompass her entire personality — her interests, fears and ambitions, her characteristic gestures and attitudes and her sense of what is humorous, what is offensive and what is profound."[74] In other words, Crary wants to challenge the idea that one can speak of a distinctively moral domain of life and thought at all. Moral thinking is always already wrapped up in the concepts, sensibilities, categories, and capacities for perception that we acquire in learning language. Moreover, Crary argues that certain moral judgments are actually unavailable to persons *apart from* these elements of perception which we gain in language acquisition and use. Proper recognition of certain structures and behaviors as harmful to women, for example, Crary argues, is dependent on the possession of certain moral sensitivities and perceptual capacities regarding gender inequality.[75] It is not, then, that an action, behavior, or circumstance is perceived and then

[73] Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 4.

[74] Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 47.

[75] See Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, 164–191. For instance, nearly all attempts to convince a skeptic that some action or behavior is sexist come down to some version of, "But how can you not see it

considered under the concept of gender inequity. Rather, the capacity to see an instance of gender inequity at all depends upon a whole set of moral faculties, including, but not limited to, the possession of concepts (things like attitudes, emotions, terminology, etc.). Objects can only appear to us, can only come into view, as they do so *in language*, which involves these faculties of perception. Insofar as objects come into view at all, they do so as already value-laden and conceptualized in language.

What does this mean for Zerilli's understanding of democratic judgment as the process by which an object of judgment "comes into view"? It means that, according to Zerilli, objects of judgment do not actually *exist* prior to the activity of democratic judgment. Something may exist for me as an object of private judgment, but it does not yet exist *for us* as a common object. The latter is achieved through a process of collective seeing, a kind of "political perception" dependent on shared sensibilities, attitudes, and affect indexed to a community's ordinary language. This coming to see an object in common is the work of building a "common sense," or *sensus communis*, about which I say more below.

Fourth, for Zerilli, the way an object comes into view as common is through the practical, rather than merely conceptual or theoretical, work of "democratic world building."[76] Such work is entirely mundane, involving the exchange of perceptions, experiences, and assessments of a public life shared with others. For Arendt, Zerilli notes, "to belong to a democratic political community is to have a 'common world', not to share a worldview, and this common world exists only where there is a plurality of

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this way?" The problem is not that the skeptic is ignorant, lacks a concept, but rather that he lacks the perceptual capacity, emotional intelligence, or affective power to *see* sexism.

[76] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 32.

worldviews."[77] The common world, in other words, is irreducibly plural, lacking a "common measure" to adjudicate differences, but it is exactly this plurality in interactive negotiation, argument, and exchange about the material world that enables persons to bring objects into view as common. An object of common judgment comes into view, then, not by the application of concepts already at hand, but through exchanges and deliberations wherein persons attempt to persuade others to see an object in a certain way. Democratic world building, then, is the very practical and ordinary activity of speaking, deliberating, and disputing perspectives on an object of common concern. Below I will argue that practices of broad-based community organizing can be seen as a world-building activity in this way. Particularly its tradition of organized listening practices embodies Arendt and Zerilli's notion that objects come into view as common insofar as we are able to cultivate a common world in which to perceive them as such.

Consider, for instance, how a neighborhood might bring a problem like gang violence into view as a common object of its democratic judgment. Persons see a notice for a public meeting organized by a local pastor and gather in a church basement as strangers drawn together by a common concern. As the meeting begins, one person shares that she now fears walking home from work on her normal route and so must pay each day for a taxi. Another explains that she can no longer take her kids to the neighborhood park because of gang activity and laments their being deprived of opportunities for play and exercise. Still another shares that his brother was wounded by a stray bullet in a drive-by, and another that he has been harassed several times by cops called in to monitor the gang situation. Through story-telling, sharing experiences,

[77] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 265.

speculating about causes, and hearing from others, the group begins to piece together a picture of neighborhood gang violence as a shared problem, a common object. In discernment they wonder if this problem is rooted in the recent escalation of poverty, rising rents, the closing of a nearby factory that employed a significant number of people in the area, the public school's termination of several high school sports programs, a lack of adequate street lighting, etc. As the evening unfolds, persons begin connecting problems, sufferings, and challenges they had once perceived as individual or private but now see in common. They have come to see their lives as socially connected and politically entangled by deliberating about this common object. A democratic world is being built and an object of common judgment is coming into view through exchange and interaction.

Two things are worth noting about this kind of world-building practice. First, the group's bringing an object into view does not depend on their resolving of conflicts between supposedly incommensurable comprehensive doctrines they may have. A group of Christians, Jews, atheists, utilitarians, secular humanists, etc. need neither moral colloquy nor agreement on shared, neutral criteria of judgment in order to see an object in common and deliberate about it. This is not because the object is obvious and given, but rather because their world-building capacities of deliberation are capable of generating shared perception of that object of common judgment. Second, this exchange is *deliberative*; it is not simply a taking of inventory of as many experiences and viewpoints as possible, assembling them side by side in a catalogue of diverse opinions. Rather, it will be, if done well, a form of argument, though not of the kind Rawls and others describe in terms of reason-giving and rational deliberation. It will be instead an

argument over perception. Every claim, story, perspective, and judgment will be an invitation for others to look at the object in a new way. Certain perspectives will be challenged or corrected, others deepened, still others ruled out entirely, in order for an object to be perceived in common. World building is agonistic in this way, dependent on forms of dispute and contestation to bring an object into view. As Zerilli puts it, these "possibilities of disagreement, conflict, and misunderstanding in attempts to reach agreement about what belongs in the common world are intrinsic to democratic politics, and no theory of judgment can render itself immune from them."[78] A common object of judgment, in other words, comes into view through struggle, through *agon*. Conflict is central to this activity, and I delineate this further below.

Fifth and finally, democratic judgment, according to Zerilli, is as much an *affective* practice as it is a discursive or rational one. Or, perhaps better, recalling Crary's argument, judgment is rational insofar as it is also affective, enabled by the sensitivities, intuitions, and perceptual capacities given to us in ordinary language. We noted this above in considering Simon's argument that political judgment, insofar as it is an activity of practical reason, involves the will, the appetites, and desire. For judgment to be shared, he argued, it must arise from an "affective communion" or shared affectivity between persons. Similarly, Zerilli, in moving democratic judgment beyond the simple adjudication of value differences in search of rational consensus, argues shared judgment is grounded in an embodied, affective, and relational practice of collective seeing.

Getting clear on the affective nature of judgment is critical to addressing the issue of achieving shared judgment amidst difference, especially in the absence of universal

[78] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 274.

criteria and rules. A common feature of liberal theory, Zerilli argues, in both its neo-Kantian expressions and among critics who argue rational judgment is all but impossible given widespread, irreconcilable conflicts of value, is an inability to come to terms with the rational and affective dimensions of judgment. Both share, she says, a "distrust of ordinary modes of judging," and this gives rise to a difficulty in appreciating the ways judgment is properly affective.[79] Neo-Kantians see ordinary judging as compromised by affect, emotions, and bias, all of which render judgment subjective and unreasonable. Critics of neo-Kantianism, of whom Zerilli has in mind affect theorists like Leslie Paul Thiele and William Connolly, question the rationalism of liberal theories of public reason, arguing that democratic reason-giving is, at bottom, *nothing but* the expression of affect, of "already primed, preconscious dispositions that are formed through the complex interaction of the social and the somatic."[80] Affect theoretical approaches to the political, Zerilli believes, rightly criticize liberal theory's tendency "to treat all aspects of human thought and action in terms of cognition," such that "our orientation to the world is wholly conceptual."[81] This kind of liberalism inevitably ends up construing judgment in terms of rational adjudication of value commitments and comprehensive doctrines. However, affect theorists overcorrect this rationalism by privileging nonconceptual orientations to the world in a way that simply reinforces a reason/affect dualism and, quite alarmingly, jettisons reason as a critical element of democratic accountability. What

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[79] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 4.

[80] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 5. See, for instance, William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Leslie Paul Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[81] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 240.

is needed, Zerilli asserts, is an "understanding of intelligent action and judgment in which affect and reason are understood to be mutually imbricated in modes of conceptuality, rather than distinct."[82]

Something like this joining of affect and reason, what we might call "rational affectivity" or "affective rationality," is actually obvious in our ordinary practices of judgment. Recall that this was one of Crary's principal points, that moral thinking and judgment cannot be separated from our ordinary life in language, its pedagogy in affect. Both neo-Kantians and affect theorists, Zerilli contends, "tend to see our ordinary modes of judging as intrinsically partial and distorting," in need of supplementing with either more universal criteria of judgment (neo-Kantianism) or an account of the redirection and formation of sub-rational affect (affect theory).[83] But we need not see judgment's affectivity as necessitating partiality or preventing judgment from being shared.[84] Instead, we can view democratic judgment as common insofar as it arises from the affective attunement characteristic of common life in language. My consideration of IAF's broad-based community organizing below, for instance, shows the ways common judgment is reached through generating affective attunement.

We are now in place to try to summarize what the activity of democratic judgment entails. In general terms, judgment is making a determination about a particular by means of a concept. But *democratic* judgment cannot be a species of judgment in this sense. In a

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[82] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 241.

[83] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 4.

[84] As Crary puts it, referring to Cavell, "There is, for him, no question of appealing to the fact that a discursive gesture is practically or affectively potent to determine that it cannot as such contribute to rationally responsible discourse, and there is also no question of appealing to the fact that such a gesture is practically or affectively potent to establish its rational credentials" (Alice Crary, "Cavell and Critique," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies* 6 [2018]: 23.).

democratic community marked by pluralism and difference, precisely what is up for grabs are the relevant concepts for perceiving an object, and so it cannot be presumed that all parties perceive an object in common. Neither is democratic judgment the activity of adjudicating various competing concepts by which to judge an object. Again, this assumes an object is already determined, perceived by all. The activity of judgment, instead, is the process by which diverse persons and groups bring an object into view as a shared object. They do this through practices of deliberation and exchange within a common world they have forged amidst difference, and this common world is characterized by affective attunement and shared perception. Having a common object in view, they are able to issue common practical judgments about that object. This involves making and grounding claims in the shared perception of an object a community has generated, perception enabled by their affective attunement. Judgments are authorized, in this way, by a "common sense" forged and shared by its members. I conclude this section by considering the nature of this common sense and the place of conflict within it.

3.3. Judgment and Sensus Communis

A democratic political community comes to common judgment because its members are able to appeal not to external, neutral criteria to resolve their disagreements but to a kind of "common sense" practical rationality forged amidst and across their differences. Democratic judgments are authorized insofar as they can be shown to make sense within this common world of meaning. Following Kant, Arendt calls this shared sense, at once both rational and affective, *sensus communis*. To explicate its dynamic character, she draws specifically on Kant's discussion of aesthetic judgments as involving matters of "taste." In judgments of the beautiful, wherein I do not simply declare a

subjective opinion about the status of an object as it appears to me but also expect others to confirm and share my assessment, an appeal to taste seeks to ground judgment in a shared sense of aesthetic pleasure. Arendt refers to this shared sense as a kind of "sixth sense" which joins and mediates our personal forms of knowing with the knowing of others.[85] As Kant argued, some kind of shared sense, *sensus communis*, is a necessary condition of judgments of taste, for it provides the public context in which such judgments can be expressed, substantiated, contested, or affirmed.[86] *Sensus communis*, then, is a form of public knowing, arising from ordinary life, and constituted by common sensibilities and intuitions. One cannot prove aesthetic judgments, and judgments of taste cannot compel consent; rather, they solicit agreement by appeal to *sensus communis*. The same is true, Arendt contends, with political judgments.

Political judgments seek justification by appeal to *sensus communis* and so operate by means of persuasion. Persuasion is a form of deliberation less like proving a thesis and more like "producing or deepening an example," as Cavell puts it, inviting someone to examine whether another expression, concept, or formulation of speech better captures the reality at hand, is a better example of what "we" say about it.[87] In terms of the above discussion of common perception, it takes the form, "Don't see it like that. Try to see it like this."[88] Or, as Kant describes aesthetic judgments, "I put forward my

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[85] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, vol. 1, Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 50.

[86] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 68–69. Prior to Kant, Giambattista Vico had written of *sensus communis*, "The common sense is a judgment without reflection sensed in common by a whole order, a whole people, a whole nation, or the whole of humankind" (*The New Science*, trans. Jason Taylor and Robert Miner [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020], 78).

[87] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 95, quoted in Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 77.

[88] Zerilli, *Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 77.

judgment of taste as an example of the judgment of common sense, and attribute to it on that account *exemplary* validity."[89] In other words, in making a judgment, one stakes oneself as representative of the judging community, not in a final sense but in order to invite agreement and contestation. Arendt's important insight, which I take to be as true of contemporary democratic politics as the politics of her day, is that political discourse, deliberation, and argument operate more along these lines of affective persuasion than of technical or rational demonstration. Establishing a judgment by appealing to *sensus communis* is an attempt to represent the judgment of others in oneself, and so declare it as common.

Luke Bretherton has proposed thinking of certain forms of participatory democracy as the construction, cultivation, and maintenance of a *sensus communis*. Broad-based community organizing, for example, he sees as a political practice that generates and sustains a form of practical rationality wherein shared judgments amidst difference can be made by appealing to a shared common sense. Grassroots pluralist politics like this can enable strangers to forge a "common world of meaning and action between diverse traditions in a particular place."[90] It is not, in other words, that moral and political diversity are overcome by appealing to any sort of neutral space beneath or above difference, but rather that, within the messy praxis of encounter, deliberation, argument, negotiation, conflict, and conciliation, *ad hoc* connections and commonalities are identified and assembled into a *sensus communis* under construction from the ground

[89] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 70.

[90] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 179. Bretherton contrasts his account of broad-based community organizing as form of building political *sensus communis* with agonistic construals of the political. My contention is that conflict and the agonistic negotiations of difference are always part and parcel of a political community's *sensus communis*.

up.[91] *Sensus communis*, that is, is politically produced, not given. Romand Coles similarly conceptualizes forms of coalitional, interreligious, multiracial, and multicultural grassroots politics as "nepantalist," drawing on the Chicano/a notion of *nepantla*, or "in-between-ness."[92] For him, pluralistic politics that is agonistic, rather than "cosmopolitan," seeks not a discursive plane beyond difference, converting differences into a singular liberal "currency" for speech and judgment; rather, politics unfolds within spaces "torn" between moral, religious, and political traditions and visions.[93] Within such torn spaces and through practices of nepantalist generosity, listening, and receptive engagement, coalitions can form and common interests identified. *Sensus communis*, as an achievement of agonistic negotiation across difference, draws on the languages, traditions, concepts, customs, and practices of particular constituents in order to build a common space and public practice wherein common judgments can be made.

I am proposing we understand agonistic community's complex relation of community and difference in terms of *sensus communis*. Doing so allows us to see, on the one hand, that political community need not substantial forms of agreement, rational consensus, or social harmony to ground shared judgments. *Sensus communis* is, as shown above, piecemeal, contingent, and produced through *ad hoc* connections across difference. Because it has more to do with affective commonness and shared perception than rational or moral colloquy, it can be achieved even amidst substantial difference. *Sensus communis*, in other words, is a form of political community proper to agonistic

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[91] The notion of *sensus communis* has much in common, in this way, with Jeffrey Stout's account of "moral bricolage." See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Language of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 75.

[92] Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 64–76.

[93] Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 67.

pluralism. On the other hand, *sensus communis* really is a means of generating democratic *community*. Though its construction is contingent, a bricolage of sensibilities, practices, values, stories, and local knowledge produced in political activity, it is nevertheless a form of practical rationality that endures over time. *Sensus communis*, as shared practical reason, is substantial enough to draw persons together into a common life of shared affect and perception, enabling sustained judgments over time. More ambitious than liberal public reason, *sensus communis* aims for a deep sense of commonness across difference, even while resisting the impulse to collapse or erase differences in consensus.

Theorists of grassroots democracy have, for some time, tried to make sense of this complex reality of shared, sustained common life amidst difference characteristic of coalitional and radical democratic projects. Responding to Alasdair MacIntyre's contention that no meaningful political practice can be had without substantive agreements about the human good and the ends of politics, Jeffrey Stout has argued that democracy itself should be understood as a "tradition," possessing its own language, concepts, discursive social practices, virtues, etc.[94] Stout conceives of forms of democracy like the Industrial Areas Foundation as "traditions" in this sense, suggesting their capacity to sustain common judgments over time is attributable to members' inhabiting a democratic tradition that mediates their differences. Others theorists, like Sheldon Wolin, resist this conceptualization of democracy in terms of tradition, instead viewing grassroots democratic projects as highly provisional, momentary, and "fugitive" collectivities coalescing in actions and dissolving in their aftermath.[95] Consider both of

[94] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[95] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, ed. Nicholas Xenos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 100–113.

these strategies of conceptualizing radical democracy as ways of making sense of how judgment can be shared amidst difference. For Stout, democratic judgment is possible because of the possession of shared concepts, language, values, etc., under which a particular object can be viewed. Judgment is able to be shared, Stout thinks, because common concepts and values are in place and able to be applied to particular objects. Wolin is more pessimistic about supposed "commonness" in fugitive democracy. Common judgment, for him, is spontaneous and unpredictable. It arises not from anything shared save the desire for a particular action itself. Consequently, a democratic collectivity rarely, if ever, perdures beyond a single action. Its mechanisms of producing and sharing judgment cannot be sustained over time without crystalizing into anti-democratic institutional forms.

My account of radical, agonistic democracy in terms of *sensus communis* challenges both of these understandings of judgment. *Sensus communis* cannot be said to be a "tradition," for it lacks the substantive agreements characteristic of tradition. Yet it sustains a community of democratic practice over time, grounding its successive judgments with a kind of consistency and coherence in a way similar to the operations of tradition. *Sensus communis* is best seen, I suggest, as a form of shared practical *wisdom* forged in common action, comprised of collective experiences, shared sensibilities, and local knowledge, and carried through time within a particular locality.[96] We might see *sensus communis* in terms of what the *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz calls *lo cotidiano*, or quotidian experience.[97] *Lo cotidiano*, she writes, "has to do with the

[96] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 197–198.

[97] See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 69–70.

practices and beliefs that we have inherited, with our habitual judgments, including the tactics we use to deal with the everyday."[98] It is "unmethodical" and "ad hoc," yet a kind of "common sense" passed down, reinterpreted, added to, and revised in the face of new challenges and realities.[99] It binds persons to neighbors, family, and ancestors, while also stimulating innovation. It is inspired by the "instincts of grassroots Latinas" and "sharpened by their daily struggle for survival," a collected body of "folk wisdom" that provides a community of struggle with the resources to address everyday oppression and thrive.[100] *Sensus communis* is ordinary wisdom, sustaining and sustained by a community of practical judgment.

It is within this *sensus communis* that objects come into view as common and can be judged by all. This, then, is our answer to the first question identified at the outset of this section: how can democratic judgment be sustained amidst plurality and difference in the absence of universal criteria or rules? *Sensus communis*, the contingent practical rationality forged by a democratic community, supplies a common wisdom and affective attunement within which an object of judgment is brought into common view and practical judgments about it are issued. This is a formal description of democratic judgment. Its incarnation in grassroots democratic practices will be detailed in section four. First, however, I need to address the second task of a democratic theory of judgment named above: identifying the role of conflict in coming to judgment.

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[98] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/ Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (2002): 8.

[99] Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*," 9.

[100] Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*," 9.

3.4. Judgment and Conflict

My argument in the above sections is that democratic judgment is not a matter of adjudicating supposedly incommensurable differences of value, seeking a set of universal criteria or rules to guarantee agreement and consensus. Rather, it is the process by which a community forges a common world of meaning and action, sustained by the wisdom and affective attunement of a *sensus communis*, and brings an object of judgment into view as common. Democratic judgment is about common perception. But these notions of common perception, *sensus communis*, affective attunement, and common world should not be seen in static terms, nor as embodying a kind of harmonizing of difference. Conflict, I show here, is internal to these modes of commonness and so essential to democratic judgment. Far from being an obstacle to shared judgment, as Neo-Kantian liberalism contends, conflict facilitates judgment's democratic nature.

Earlier I suggested that the work of democratic world building, of constructing and maintaining a *sensus communis*, involves activities of exchange, negotiation, even contestation. The common world, in Arendt's terms, is irreducibly plural. Concepts have no static meaning or determined range of use but are constantly in circulation and revision, being projected in new ways and redefined in others. Recall from chapter three that Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistics, in contrast to simple antagonism, involves parties who share a set of concepts and values—what we might simply call "ordinary language"—even while disagreeing about the meaning and proper use of those concepts and categories. So with democratic communities that judge. To judge democratically means to engage in disputation over the meaning of our shared words.

We can appreciate the way conflict and disagreement are inherent to arriving at common judgment by considering Wittgenstein and Cavell's understanding of language-use. What is remarkable about human language, Cavell notes, following Wittgenstein, is that "our uses of language are pervasively, almost unimaginably, *systematic*."[101] The extent of this systematic coherence is attributable not to agreements reached by convention or determined criteria or rules for language use ("We *cannot* have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary" for our language to work[102]), but something deeper, what Wittgenstein called "attunement" and "(odd as it may sound) agreement in judgments."[103] Cavell notes just how surprising Wittgenstein's notion of agreement in judgment here is:

> Now the whole thing looks backwards. Criteria were to be the bases (features, marks, specifications) on the basis of which certain judgments could be made (non-arbitrarily); agreement over criteria was to make possible agreement about judgments. But in Wittgenstein it looks as if our ability to establish criteria depended upon a prior agreement in judgments.[104]

Here we see just how different the approaches to judgment taken by neo-Kantianism and ordinary language philosophy really are. The former seeks to establish universal criteria prior to deliberation in order for common judgment to be reached. Agreement on criteria, established by, for example, public reason, determines the space within which judgment can proceed as legitimately shared. Wittgenstein reverses this, showing how our shared and contested criteria are dependent upon the more fundamental attunement and

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[101] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.

[102] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 31.

[103] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §§241, 242.

[104] Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 30.

agreement in judgment that comprise ordinary life and speech, indeed makes such life and speech possible in the first place. Attunement does not guarantee agreement about *particular* judgments, for example, in the political sphere. Far from it. It names the space within which disagreement can occur; it is the *condition* of conflict. To use the language of the previous section, attunement allows for an object of judgment to come into view and so defines the discursive space in which arguments about it can be had. Cavell and Wittgenstein push us to recognize that the possibility of disagreement and conflict over particular judgments rests upon, and is made possible by, a more basic agreement in judgment. Conflict and attunement are mutually imbricated.

Cavell and Wittgenstein, in other words, challenge us to consider what it means that our disagreements and conflicts always occur *in language* and that disagreement and conflict are part and parcel *of* language-use. Disagreement is possible, our conflict is intelligible as a conflict, insofar as it can be articulated in language. But once this occurs, a whole host of agreements, shared forms of life, and mutual attunements become visible. To genuinely disagree presumes a shared concept or set of concepts; the dispute is over the criteria governing its uses, the boundaries of its coherence. As Beiner notes, this sharing of a concept does not mean that "the *actual* achievement of agreement is assured," but rather that "one cannot speak of a shared concept where there is no *possibility* of agreement on how to apply the concept."[105] Thus, Beiner goes on, "fundamental disagreements" can "arise over such concepts," but "there must be *some* conceptual contact between those in fundamental conflict…*There must be this minimal*

[105] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 141.

(or formal) shared judgment if conflicts of judgment are to occur."[106] This is the paradox into which ordinary language philosophy invites democratic theory: both agreement and disagreement are inherent to language use; both conflict and commonness are intrinsic to judgment. Again, to assert that disagreement is necessarily founded on more basic sets of agreements is not, in any way, to diminish the extent or intensity of the conflicts which precede coming to democratic judgment. Exactly the opposite, in fact: agreement in judgment, or attunement in our shared use of language and the basic shape of concepts, makes conflict intelligible *as conflict*. Absent basic agreements in judgment, difference is simply alterity. For difference to rise to the level of conflict, it must be located within, an achievement of, our common life in language.

Attunement and conflict, then, belong together. Intelligible conflict presumes a commonness and common life in language. Beiner notes the importance of this for political judgment: "[J]udgment implies judging community"; but this necessarily provokes and "gives rise to the question: which community?"[107] Conflicts over practical judgments always presuppose shared language, concepts, and intelligibility, a "we" that judges. But just who it is that shares these, shares *in* this common life in language, is continually in question, reformation, and contestation. The constitution of the judging community and its *sensus communis*, animated by agreement and disagreement, is perpetually in motion with each new claim of judgment, each new projection and adaptation of a concept, and each contestation of attempts to speak for the judging community. So Cavell and Wittgenstein reveal that the critical question for democratic

[106] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 141, emphasis mine.

[107] Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 144.

judgment is not *how to establish a judging community* (through public reason, deliberative procedures, universal criteria, etc.). Every act of judgment already presumes and prepossess *some* judging community. The central question of democratic judgment is instead about *how the judging community negotiates its conflicts, polices its boundaries, and settles disagreements*. The task of democratic politics is not to bring a judging community into existence but to extend, open, and democratize the judging community which necessarily exists in any political formation.

But not only is conflict inevitable for any linguistic and political community insofar as the sharing of concepts entails disagreements regarding their use, conflict is also productive for the common life of the judging community. It is what makes democratic community *agonistic*. Agonistic community not only acknowledges the inevitability of conflict but also facilitates its use, directing it toward democratic ends. One important reason why conflict, and its facilitation rather than suppression, must be integral to agonistic community is that formations of a democratic *sensus communis* can mask and reify hierarchical social relations and circulations of power. The urgency of coming to judgment can lead democratic communities to thus rely on and leave uncontested configurations of power and privilege organized by economic, racial, gender, and cultural hierarchies. In such cases, the *sensus communis* becomes far too narrow. Rather than representing the whole, it legitimizes the interests of the few.[108]

Conflict and contestation, however, can be a means of democratizing and pluralizing the *sensus communis*, aiding the formation of judgments that are more

[108] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 194. Bretherton refers here to the important attention to power in the construal of political practical reason given in Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*, trans. Steven Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

common and democratic by reconfiguring, expanding, or reforming the practical wisdom which grounds them. Conflictual interventions like sit-ins, disruptive public actions, and protests can be ways of asserting the need for, as Bretherton puts it, "representation of other interests and voices in the decision-making process in order to reflect the contested nature of knowledge and judgment."[109] Agonistic communities, at their best, find ways to encourage and facilitate forms of nonviolent conflict and contestation in order to challenge and reconfigure relations of power and the constitution of the judging community. It is through such conflict that "the selfish interests of the one, the few, or the many" are confronted, destabilized, contested, and reconfigured so as to identify genuinely common goods and interests.[110]

In this way, conflict is democratically *generative*. It contributes to the construction of a more just and inclusive *sensus communis* and prevents the practice of judgment from becoming simply an exercise of the most powerful. Agonistic negotiations of difference, the clashing and contestations of public assemblies, protests, heated arguments between community leaders in church basements—these can broaden or revise what is taken to belong to *sensus communis* and thus justification for judgment. Moreover, they can generate new ways of seeing, hearing, and discerning, new language and concepts for determining judgments, and new capacities for common action

[109] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 194.

[110] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 194. On how certain discursive practices and norms can pathologize and sacralize marginality, and thus displace the kinds of conflict necessary for democratic collective struggle, see Olúfémi O. Táíwò, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Difference," *The Philosopher* 108, no. 4 (2020): 61–69. See also Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016).

unavailable to persons prior to their struggle together.[111] Audre Lorde calls this the "creative function of difference," the "fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic."[112] Agonistic politics is motivated by this commitment—that conflict can both expand and broaden the field of deliberation and judgment, occasioning new prospects, potentialities, and imaginative possibilities for common action.

3.5. Beyond Consensus: Judgment and Dissent

Finally, it is important to note that judgment is not a final resolution to the agonisms and conflicts of democratic deliberation, even if it is occasioned by them. Shared judgment can occur within conflictual and pluralist communities, but it does not then dissolve their agonisms and contradictions. This is because judgment is a decision made in the absence of full consensus and so produces dissent. As Mouffe says, every judgment entails a "*decision* which excludes other possibilities."[113] An agonistic community of judgment cannot suspend judgment until full consensus is reached because full consensus never arrives.[114] But the presence of dissent does not make a judgment

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[111] The notion that certain capacities for common political action are birthed only within the experience of common struggle is a central feature of the work of Leo Panitch. See, for instance, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Corbyn, Sanders* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020); and the essays in *A Different Kind of State? Popular Power and Democratic Administration*, ed. Gregory Albo, David Langille, and Leo Panitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[112] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 111, quoted in Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 207.

[113] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2009), 105.

[114] So Foucault, for instance, understands consensus as a "critical principle," not an actual possibility, but one which nevertheless aims toward ever greater inclusion in judgment. As a critical principal, it provokes consideration of "what proportion of nonconsensuality is necessary or not," and interrogation of "every power relation to that extent." See Michel Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 379.

illegitimate or undemocratic, so long as dissent is given a meaningful place in the life of a democratic community. In chapter four I showed that even shared judgments—for example, between a married couple—can contain certain negativities within them; indeed, they must preserve the memory of conflict in order to safeguard the contingency and fallibility of those judgments. To remember that a judgment was contested is also to remember that it is contestable, open to revision. Dissent functions similarly in agonistic communities as a reminder of the imperfectability, contingency, and fallibility of judgment. Contestation, then, not only contributes to a community's arrival at common judgment, it also follows the making of the judgment, testing it, challenging it, and demanding further judgments.

The exigencies of political life are such that judgments must continually be made in the face of uncertainty, conflict, disagreement, and dissent. This, however, does not undermine their commonness or legitimacy. For if conflict is not opposed to community but constitutive of it, as I have been arguing, then conflict and common judgment are likewise not opposed. On the one hand, this seems to be a flat contradiction: how can one belong to the sharing of a judgment to which she dissents? Yet if judging is reframed as the activity of bringing an object into view as common, rather than simply the adjudication of rival perspectives, as I have argued, then we might see those who dissent from a community's decision as nevertheless contributing to the activity of judgment, both in terms of contributing to bringing an object into view as common, as well as performing the crucial work of criticism. The latter is especially important for agonistic communities. Resignation and resentment in the face of disagreement drain dissent of its critical edge and thus democracy of its agonistic vitality. Agonistic communities depend

on practices of self-interrogation, criticism, and protest. For them to thrive, their constituents must possess a kind of loyalty to others, even to those with whom one disagrees, which grounds a commitment to endure objectionable judgments in faithful and hopeful dissent. Likewise, agonistic communities that make judgments must be willing to hear dissent, even encourage it, so that those who object to a community's decision feel confident their disapproval is heard and registered, and thus that their fidelity to a political community is worthwhile, even amidst disagreement.[115]

Put differently, dissent and opposition always haunt and linger in the shadow of political judgments. Even common judgments produce "remainders" which they must acknowledge and to which they are accountable. Listening to these remainders and enduring the conflict of their protest and contestation can grant agonistic communities the capacity to see their judgments as contingent, fallible, and reformable. Alasdair MacIntyre reminds that the judgments of moral traditions, which he says are simply "continuities of conflict" and extended arguments over time, are always provisional.[116] "If we do rest in a conclusion reached by dialectical argument it is only because no experiences have led us to revise our belief" in fundamental ways, at least not yet. "No alternative opinion advanced," he continues, "has been able better to withstand objections than that at which we had already arrived. But the possibility of further dialectical development always remains open."[117] To remain open to development, to revision, a

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[115] Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 213–237. See also Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 31–69.

[116] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

[117] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 100–101, quoted in Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 91.

deliberative community must make its judgments vulnerable to critique and contestation. Democratic communities that are agonistic must remain open and attentive to the generative and productive potentialities of conflict and contest in this way.

4. Conflict, Judgment, and Agonistic Community: The Industrial Areas Foundation

My account of democratic judgment, agonistic community, and the use of conflict has, until now, remained at a formal and conceptual level. I turn here to a consideration of one type of grassroots democratic practice I take to embody these ideas in concrete terms. My reason for analyzing the organizing practices of the Industrial Areas Foundation has less to do with it serving as an illustrative example or confirmation of my theoretical account of agonistic community and more with making explicit the experience of radical, agonistic democracy informing and shaping that account. My arrival at this perspective on agonistic politics has been deeply shaped by my participation in and reflection on IAF organizing. Looking carefully, if only briefly, at the nature of IAF organizing, then, is an attempt to show the concrete practical politics informing my theory of democratic conflict. Just as IAF organizing includes reflection, teaching, and theorizing as part of its activism, so democratic theorizing of the kind I am after must, in some way, arise from and articulate the experience of agonistic democratic praxis. In what follows, I examine several of the IAF's organizing strategies under the categories of "seeing," "judging," and "acting,"[118] in order to show how they embody an agonistic politics of common judgment.

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[118] This "See-Judge-Act" typology is drawn from Latin American liberation theology, though I make use of these terms in a slightly different way. See Clodovis Boff, "Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 57–84; and Andrew Dawson, "The Origins and Character of the Base Ecclesial Community: A Brazilian Perspective," in *The Cambridge*

Founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is a network of broad-based community organizing institutions, with over sixty affiliate organizations throughout the United States and in the UK, Australia, Germany, and Canada.[119] Sharing an approach to organizing and tactics of grassroots politics developed first by Alinsky and subsequently by leaders like Ed Chambers, Richard Harmon, and Ernesto Cortes, Jr., the IAF embodies a distinct form of democratic and participatory politics, one which has garnered attention from a number of Christian thinkers and leaders.[120] One of its most distinguishing features is the important place congregations and communities of faith have in IAF organizations. Because membership is established not by individual persons but by member institutions, churches, along with synagogues, mosques, neighborhood groups, parent-teacher associations, labor unions, and other civic associations play a major role in mediating the work of a community organization and the lives of citizens. IAF organizations are composed of networks of institutions within a locality, and they depend on the resources, place-based knowledge, leadership, and relational webs of these institutions for their work, even as they seek to bring these

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Companion to Liberation Theology, ed. Christopher Rowland (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146–147.

[119] *Industrial Areas Foundation*. www.industrialareasfoundation.org/affiliates (accessed March 9, 2021).

[120] See, for instance, the correspondence early on between Alinsky and Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain in *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinsky*, ed. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Some contemporary theological reflections on Alinsky-style organizing include Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*; Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*; Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Receiving from the Other: Theology and Grass-Roots Organizing," *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012): 421–434; Austin Ivereigh, *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organising* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010); Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2014); Chris Shannahan, *A Theology of Community Organizing: Power to the People* (New York: Routledge, 2014); C. Melissa Snarr, *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

institutions into relationship with each other in the pursuit of common goods. The IAF is thus a form of *broad-based* organizing, in that organizations are not issue-specific, nor do they seek to represent the interests of a particular group.[121] Rather, the IAF provides an organizational context and set of tactical strategies within which community groups and institutions can identify matters of shared concern, organize people and knowledge for addressing common problems, practice modes of listening, discernment, and deliberation in order to come to shared judgment, and build power for common action.

There are three primary reasons for my turning to the IAF's organizing practices in light of my argument thus far. First, the IAF embodies a deep concern for the building, tending, and sustaining of *organizations*, or communities of democratic praxis. At the heart of its philosophy of organizing is the belief that more important than and fundamental to an organization's actions and wins is a commitment to the formation and nurturing of a democratic community capable of sharing judgment and action over time. Organizers often refer to this commitment in terms of prioritizing "people over program," and it is embodied in the centrality of relational practices of meeting, listening, assembling, institution building, and leadership formation, all of which are aimed at the long-term project of building a democratic culture and enhancing the capacities of ordinary citizens to act politically. Second, a critical feature of the IAF's grassroots politics is its capacity to generate political *judgments* that are common, both among the diverse constituents of a locality and between elected officials and those who hold them accountable. What makes the IAF's actions authentically democratic is that they emerge out of time intensive, broad-based campaigns of listening, deliberation, and reflection

[121] Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 32.

among large groups of ordinary citizens. Judgments are arrived at through countless deliberative meetings and thus claim to represent a wide democratic base. When an organization makes a judgment or performs an action, it does so not as an interest group but, it claims, as a representative citizen body. Third, the IAF's organizing practices and strategies are unique in their ability to draw on and nurture deeply *affective* and *conflictual* dimensions of democratic life. At any stage or level of organizing, as we will see below, one is likely to see encounters between persons that are both profoundly emotional and intensely contentious. Embracing these agonistic moments and attending to their productive and generative capacities, IAF organizing catalyzes conflict for action. It is because of three dimensions of IAF organizing—community, judgment, and conflict—that it exemplifies a form of agonistic political community.[122]

4.1. Seeing: Affective Attunement and Bringing an Object into View

The IAF prides itself on the fundamental place of listening in its grassroots politics. Organizing campaigns begin and end in listening meetings, and the IAF sees its political action as authorized and representative insofar as it arises out of extensive neighborhood listening practices. Two practices serve as the chief contexts for democratic listening: one-on-one meetings and house meetings. The IAF's listening practices provide the foundational basis of common judgment and action and are the spaces in which affective attunement is realized and objects of democratic judgment come into view as common.

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[122] IAF organizations, I suggest, are both instances of agonistic community *in themselves*, as well as important catalysts for the restoring and remaking of political community at both the local municipal, state, and national levels. Ernie Cortés refers to this capacity of organizing as its "reweaving the social fabric" of societies. See Ernesto Cortés, Jr., "Reweaving the Social Fabric," *Boston Review* 19, nos. 3–4 (June–Sep 1994): 12–14.

"One-on-ones," as organizers call them, are twenty to thirty-minute meetings that organizers conduct with individuals in the organization or citizens in the broader community in order to hear personal stories, solicit assessments of and reactions to community health, problems, and opportunities, and build relationships around common interests.[123] The goal of one-on-ones is not to "sell" the organization or gather a signature for a petition, but rather to listen to citizens' articulations of their experience living in a community and with its problems, to probe these articulations with questions, sometimes provocative ones, in order to move a person to a commitment to address those problems with others. As Ernesto Cortes conceives of them, one-on-ones are where organizers identify persons with "a clear sense of self-interest in getting involved, a willingness to act, and the presence of controlled or 'cold' anger" about an issue.[124] One-on-ones, then, are not a place for casual small talk, nor are they "check-ins" with organization or community members. They are aimed at identifying and building a distinctly political kind of relationships around shared goods and interests.[125] Organizers are trained to conduct one-on-ones with disciplined purpose. They ask questions like: What experiences contributed to your deciding to become a [teacher, non-profit director, pastor, social worker, etc.]? What makes you angry about living in this neighborhood? What do you think about [the recent police activity, the closing of the nearby hospital, last week's shooting, etc.]? What does the neighborhood you dream of look like? What are you doing

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[123] See Edward T. Chambers, "The Relational Meeting," in *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 44–54.

[124] *IAF Organizing*. https://www.citizenshandbook.org/iaf.pdf (accessed March 8, 2021).

[125] Montgomery County Education Association, *Relational Organizing Resources: The Art of One-On-One Meetings*. http://mceanea.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2014/09/Primer-on-One-on-Ones.pdf (accessed March 9, 2021).

right now to change things? In conversation, organizers will then ask follow-up questions and further probe a person's answers, pushing to elicit their deep passions, fundamental experiences, and driving motivations in order to connect them to the common experience of others and the organizing of those others to address issues of common concern. Over the course of conducting sometimes hundreds of one-on-ones for any given campaign, what emerges is not simply an inventory of individuals' stories and experiences, an "aggregation of different self-interests," but, as Coles puts it, a "growing articulation of interest as '*interesse*—which means to be among or between"—as passions and perceptions are linked to those of others.[126] The goal of one-on-ones, in this sense, is to move persons from seeing something as "my problem" to perceiving it as "our problem," which we might then address and act on *together*.

One of the most important, and perhaps surprising, elements of IAF one-on-one meetings is the place of agitation in them. In training and discussions, IAF leaders specifically use this language of "agitation" to describe the activity of listening. Because organizers are interested in provoking the people they meet with to commitment and action, moving them from simple "coping" with social problems to a more assertive role in addressing them with others, organizers seek to engage persons with respectful provocation.[127] "What is really motivating you?" "If you're so angry about that, why haven't you done anything about it?" "What's keeping you from joining this work?" Provocations like these aim to agitate a person toward discovering a sense of solidarity

[126] Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 222, quoting Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling,* 224.

[127] Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 36.

with others and commitment to public action. As leading organizer and theorist Michael Gecan puts it,

> You challenge them in a way that you can only do effectively when you are face to face, one to one, 'How can you stand to live in this place? What have you tried to do to turn it around? Are you willing to work with groups you say you dislike to make a difference here?' And you let others agitate you, as they did. 'What are you, a white guy, doing here?' 'What makes you think that EBC will be any different from all the other do-nothing groups around here?' 'What does any of this have to do with ministry and faith, anyway?'[128]

Listening, in other words, in not a passive activity in one-on-ones but a dynamic and agonistic exchange aimed at excavating passion and generating emotion around an issue in order to build a common sense of purpose. It is also agonistic in the sense of being an exchange of self-giving and receiving wherein individuals and communities make themselves vulnerable to the affective power of others to reshape their own sense of things.[129] Coles describes the agitation of one-on-ones as arising out of a kind of "radical curiosity" about another which seeks to encourage them to "listen to themselves more attentively and hopefully better than they might have done before."[130] Agitation, then, is seen to be productive, forging new attitudes, passions, commitments, and shared perceptions. Essentially, it aims to move a person from passivity and privacy to sense of shared power and common interest with others. It is agitation that makes listening an agonistic practice and central to forging a sense of one's capacity for shared action.

Over the course of many one-on-ones, organizers identify leaders within a community who will be able to organize their neighbors, contacts, friends, and

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[128] Michael Gecan, *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), 24–25.

[129] Jonathan Tran, *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory: Time and Eternity in the Far Country* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 256–258.

[130] Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 231.

acquaintances for small house meetings. House meetings, the second major listening practice of the IAF, are aimed at gathering members of a community to share stories and perceptions, hear from their neighbors, and begin to build a sense of shared plight and promise. House meetings embody what I have discussed above in terms of democratic world building. They gather persons around matters of common concern, across their many differences, in order to generate a common world of speech and action. In many ways, house meetings carry the practice of one-on-ones into a larger setting, usually of around ten to fifteen people. House meetings are often organized around a general issue (crime in the neighborhood, problems with the local school's facilities, lack of jobs in a particular part of the city) and seek to draw on participants' experiences and lived knowledge of the issue in order to move toward a shared understanding of the problem and ways of addressing it together. The key to a successful house meeting is to facilitate a common space of listening to one's neighbors, so as to forge a common sense of and orientation to shared issues.

What is important about house meetings, in view of my argument in this chapter, is that they are not primarily spaces of reason-giving and debate, even if reasons are sometimes given and asked for. Instead, house meetings are spaces of expression (of anger, grief, pain, hope) and empathic listening. Through the communication of experience, persons move toward affective attunement with others around objects of common concern. Jeffrey Stout has written eloquently of the importance of this affective dimension of house meetings, which is significantly connected to their being an embodied practice of listening. In a house meeting, a participant, "demonstrating the courage to expose his or her concerns and emotions to others, begins to acquire a sense of

selfhood in their eyes. This in turn is reflected back to the one speaking. The story visibly moves others in the group, who then take a similar risk of self-exposure."[131] Over the course of a meeting, through the sharing of stories, experiences, passions, and perceptions, shared trust and vulnerability begin to emerge, as does a sense of common experience: "[O]ne story and then another will echo a story that came earlier" and connections begin to materialize—both "emotional connections among the individuals who are mirroring one another's concerns, but also thematic connections among the stories, a number of which now appear to be about something more than the particulars referred to explicitly in them."[132] Establishing these two forms of connection is a critically important goal of house meetings. The first indicates the emergence of affective attunement between participants. As Stout notes, it is important that house meetings are face-to-face encounters, sometimes the only in-person contact persons might have with some of their neighbors, because it is in the body that "we *see* emotion," experience it in "the face, hands, posture, and voice of the one speaking."[133] This embodied form of speaking and listening is crucial to the development of affective attunement, for, as Stout notes, contemporary neuroscience has consistently shown how "emotions travel" in embodied, face-to-face contact with persons. Mirror neurons in the brain begin "*taking in* and *partaking in* the emotions and actions of other people…*connect[ing] us directly* with the emotions of other people who are present to us."[134] This "mirroring" of affect is how

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[131] Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 155.

[132] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 155.

[133] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 152.

[134] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 153.

individuals become attuned to one another. As Stout rights, "I *incorporate* a neurological model of the other person's emotion. I take it into my body. Our neurological systems are, so to speak, *plugged into* each other when we are meeting face to face."[135] Of course, there is nothing necessary or automatic about our responding to others empathically in this way; nor will our experience of their self-disclosure be one of pure acceptance without critique or question. Embodied practices of listening depend upon capacities for empathy and virtues of responsiveness, receptivity, and critical engagement. But righty pursued, embodied listening can generate real attunement of affect and connection between persons with respect to shared problems, concerns, or goods.

The second form of connection Stout mentions—the recognition of *thematic* connections between stories—indicates an object of common judgment coming into view. After the sharing of multiple stories and experiences around a shared concern, common threads often emerge as stories intersect with one another. An experience once perceived as isolated and unique to an individual (shame, guilt, and despair over difficulty with a home mortgage) now begins to appear as part of a public matter (a crisis of unjust lending and home foreclosure). "Each teller of those stories," Stout remarks, "might have entered the meeting thinking of this matter as a personal concern, but it is starting to look like a community's concern."[136] And as personal struggles become connected to a sense of common plight with others, participants work towards a clarity of perception. An object of common judgment and action begins to appear.

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[135] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 153.

[136] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 156.

While house meetings are spaces of generating affective attunement through story-telling and listening, they are not simply a forum for conveying experiences and articulating grievances. Rather, they are agonistic conversations that seek to move in a particular *direction*—namely, toward common judgment and action. Organizers are thus trained to approach house meetings not as a time to hear a succession of stories and perspectives, but rather as an opportunity to stir up and facilitate agitation, interaction, and tension between persons and perspectives. At the beginning of house meetings, for instance, organizers will ask participants for permission to interrupt persons at times, both for the sake of time management and in order to direct a conversation toward productive ends. Throughout a conversation, an organizer might intervene to ask questions and probe a participant's story, request someone to make an abstract statement more concrete by giving an example, invite challenges or alternative perceptions from others in the group, and all in order to build energy through a kind of friendly, conflictual deliberation. A house meeting is not a focus group, in other words, but a deliberating body. Its aim is to bring an object of judgment into view as common, but this can only be achieved by the staking of claims and the "application of value-laden concepts."[137] It is one thing to express personal frustration about a problem or desire for some good. It is another thing altogether to say, "This is wrong and I want to change it," or, "We need this to make our community safer." The latter expresses judgments of value and so invites others to share, adopt, contest, or reject them. Through agonistic and disputative conversation participants arrive at something resembling shared perception and judgment.[138]

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[137] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 158.

[138] Similar patterns can be observed in the activities of ecclesial base communities in Central and South American liberation movements. See, for example, Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*

4.2. Judging: Framing and Assembling

Once something has been identified as an object of common judgment, it must be "framed" or "cut" as an issue. Framing takes an indeterminate, general matter of common experience and narrows it to something definable, specific, and winnable. Organizers often refer to this as transforming a "problem" into an "issue." Gentrification and difficulty paying rising rents is a common experience; affordable housing is a common object of judgment; but city investment in 500 new affordable housing units is an *issue* which can be won. A house meeting may have articulated a shared experience and discovered a common object of judgment, but it does not yet possess an issue to act on. Achieving the latter means that definitions have been given, "a proposal for dealing with it has been formulated, and a strategy for implementing the proposal has been sketched out."[139] Framing an issue thus involves research, analysis of structures of power, identification of persons with authority to change things, along with their motivations, constraints, and connections, and inventory of the capacities of a community organization to marshal pressure and power to make change. Much of this is the work of committees formed to directly address technical or strategic matters in constructing a realistic and actionable proposal for an organization. Once the proposal is formed, it is taken back to the various member organizations, house meetings, and persons involved in identifying the problem in the first place in order to evaluate and discuss the proposal. Here again we see the importance of conflictual engagement in coming to common judgment, for it may

(Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), which narrates the collective Scriptural reading practices and deliberative proceedings of one of these groups, demonstrating how common judgment can be reached through argumentative and agonistic engagement around common struggle.

[139] Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, 160.

be that rank-and-file members find a proposal insufficient, off-based, or not aligned with their actual interests. A proposal may then need to be further revised, nuanced by more research and analysis, or informed by more grassroots listening sessions. In this process of critical engagement and contestation over a proposal, a community organization comes to more precise, and thus more shared, judgment as it appropriately frames an issue for broad-based action.

An important consequence of framing an issue is that it is able to draw persons into a community of action, assembling them into a collectivity able to exercise shared agency and power. A community cannot act together on a *problem*, but it can collectively act on an *issue*. Bretherton notes the difference of an issue, in this regard, from vague and amorphous problems: "To focus on problems is antipolitical because it generates apathy and fatalism and so drains energy for change and directs people away from public action…Focusing on problems privatizes the grief people feel by making it count for nothing and dislocating it from any identifiable and nameable community of witness."[140] Framing an issue, on the other hand, grants people agency by joining them to others in addressing a definable, specific, and winnable matter. As Bretherton puts it, "People cannot choose the problems that afflict them but they can choose the solutions they think might help alleviate those problems."[141] Framing an issue, then, is essential to the construction of a community of action.

We might best understand this community of action in terms of what William Connolly calls an "assemblage," though with some important qualifications. The

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[140] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 132.

[141] Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 132.

"assemblage" is a dynamic form of political community, constantly in reconfiguration, lacking a unified center, and comprised of a network of alliances and connections formed across difference, all in order to achieve a common action. Assemblages are provisional, "mobile constellation(s)" of a plurality of actors, motivated by a multiplicity of interests and reasons, but bound together by "action in concert."[142] Importantly, an assemblage is always ordered to and constituted by action. In Connolly's view, there is no shared fundamental basis for collective action other than the action itself. An assemblage is always "in motion,"[143] and thus a highly contingent, provisional, and momentary political configuration, one which usually dissipates once an action is complete.

Connolly's notion of the assemblage captures something important about the nature of IAF organizing and its formation of communities of action. The reality is that not every member or institution of a community organization acts, or acts to the same degree, on every issue and campaign. Nor is the configuration of a community of action the same in every instance. Each organizing campaign draws together from the community organization a unique set of leaders, experts, and persons with stakes in an issue. The shape of an organization during an affordable housing campaign may look different than that same organization during a campaign against predatory lending. Constantly in reconfiguration, both by the joining of new members and institutions with new perspectives, skills, experiences, and resources, as well as by the reorganization of internal processes of organizing and shaping campaigns, the assemblage is always in flux,

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[142] William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 95–96. See also, Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 123–129.

[143] William E. Connolly, "The Power of Assemblages and the Fragility of Things," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10 (2008): 246.

with porous boundaries and adaptable internal organs. The assemblage forged to address an issue and make a common action possesses flexibility and mobility.

Yet Connolly's image of the assemblage does not capture a crucially important element of the IAF, which is its capacity to forge communities of action consistently over time and with significant continuities between them. Because they are place-based and comprised of local institutions, IAF organizations are able to sustain a culture of common judgment and action that persists through multiple campaigns and actions. Indeed, the knowledge acquired over the course of a campaign (say, about the internal operations of a city government, the constraints of a city councilmember, the various competing interests at play in municipal budgeting) is preserved, informing future actions. Practical experience, wisdom, and strategy build over the course of multiple campaigns, contributing to an organization's power and capacity for successful action. Over time, a *sensus communis* and set of common practices develop which enable the continual forging of common judgments and action amidst transformations in an organization and community. Though issues, members, leaders, and circumstances may all change over time, even dramatically so, a democratic community is able to endure. Because of the endurance and stability of its practical wisdom and repertoire of knowledge, strategy, and tactics, it is more appropriate to speak of IAF organizations as agonistic communities than as assemblages.

4.3. Acting: Common Action and the Public Use of Conflict

Finally, after countless listening sessions, strategy meetings, and deliberative forums, an organization is ready to make a public action. One of the most common and important forms of public action an organization makes is what IAF groups call an

"accountability session." An accountability session can draw together hundreds, sometimes thousands, of organization members and citizens in a high-energy "public drama" of organized power and voice. One or several "targets" are invited to the action—elected officials, business leaders, public authorities—in order to negotiate a commitment to shared action around an issue. The public action follows a highly disciplined and organized script. A meeting always begins with the assertion of an organization's "credential"—a statement of its identity, purpose, numerical composition, and representative claims.[144] This is usually followed by a prayer from a local religious leader, the giving of "testimonies" by community members particularly affected by an issue, and a summary of the organization's research report on an issue, which frames the issue under consideration. Finally, the heart of the action comes when invited guests are presented with the organization's proposals and asked to commit to certain actions or to work with the organization in formulating policy to address an issue. The guests are then given an opportunity to respond, usually in about two to seven minutes, and are asked a series of "pinning questions" to which they must give a straightforward yes or no answer.[145] Sometimes, and especially if a campaign has worked closely with a public official or community leader leading up to the action, this moment proceeds as a planned, public commitment established between an official and the organization. At other times, however, accountability sessions are less pro forma and more contentious and conflictual, and the exchange between invited public officials and organization leaders is tense and highly agonistic.

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[144] Wood, *Faith in Action*, 37–38.

[145] Wood, *Faith in Action*, 43.

Richard Wood, in observing many of these forms of public action, refers to this as the strategic use of "public conflict."[146] Often, if a public official or leader is unwilling to commit to an organization's proposal, he or she may obfuscate, speak in generalities, or drift into a kind of campaign-speech rhetoric. Representatives of the organization will respond to these evasions in highly conflictual ways, pushing the official to make a clear yes or no response or shutting off his or her microphone if he or she continues to speak without addressing the question. Through such tactics, organizations seek to "flip the script" of power, forcing public officials and elites to acknowledge citizen accountability, flexing their collective power and agency. As Coles describes it, "Suddenly, those who typically preside—and who are seen to preside—over the 'common' public space find themselves situated in a common space where they are decidedly not in control, a common space where the topics under discussion, the framing of these topics, the duration allotted to various speakers, the mood in the room, and so forth" are determined and established by the assembled community.[147] It is important to note that organizations do not seek out this kind of public conflict as a good in itself. Their intention is to *win* an issue, and so the more work an organization is able to do before an action to guarantee its success, the better. Nevertheless, if public officials prove uncooperative, an organization is not afraid to use the occasion of a public action to try to "push officials onto new terrain," utilizing the assembly and its power to pressure them to either new public

[146] Wood, *Faith in Action*, 46–49.

[147] Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 233.

commitments or public refusals to act, which will be used against them come election season.[148]

In public actions like accountability sessions, then, we see how the purposeful use of conflict can achieve greater accountability between public officials and communities, as well as pressure officials to respond to the needs of citizens and their communities. The IAF thus makes strategic use of conflict in order to reach shared judgments and action between governing officials and citizens. That accountability sessions utilize these adversarial practices means that organizations do not always win an issue. Yet by the end of a public action it is at least clear where a public official or leader stands and thus how an organization should proceed. Either a common judgment has been reached or it has not. Moreover, for the community organization, the experience of a public action contributes to members' sense of political agency. The energy generated by its gathering, ritual activity, power of accountability, and display of collective voice all give rise to an awareness of a community's capacity for common action. The assembly, then, is as much a symbolic practice as it is a practical action, which is why commentators use the language of "public drama" to describe it.[149] The accountability session gathers persons to participate in a unified action and so binds them as a political "people" capable of acting together. In other words, it is through carrying out common action that a democratic community is able to recognize itself as a *community*.

What I hope to have made clear in this summary account of IAF organizing is that conflict is not incidental to agonistic democratic communities' arrival at judgment but

[148] Wood, *Faith in Action*, 42.

[149] Wood, *Faith in Action*, 42.

central to its form. Conflict and contestation are critical elements of IAF's politics, in part, because of the way it emphasizes relational, embodied, and affective practices of listening, reason-giving, and deliberation. Through this work of "slow democracy," to use Susan Clark's term,[150] a *sensus communis* is built and nourished over time, creating space in which citizens come to affective attunement and issue common judgments together. In this way, the IAF is perhaps the most "natural" form of politics imaginable, by which I simply mean a kind of politics proper to the finitude, contingency, and embodiment of creaturely life. In these conditions of creaturehood, conflict always remains as a dynamic feature of political community. The IAF's agonistic politics of judgment simply catalyzes this and makes productive use of conflict for radical democratic ends. In doing so, it exemplifies the ways agonistic community attends to the goodness of conflict in creaturely life and its capacity to yield shared judgment and action.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to reconstruct an account of political community along agonistic and radically democratic lines, one in which conflict is seen not as antithetical to or subversive of genuine community but constitutive of its flourishing. In such agonistic community, commonness amidst difference manifests not in substantial forms of shared identity, moral consensus, or fundamental agreement but in shared judgment and action. By approaching politics from the standpoint of theological anthropology, as thinkers like Althusius and Yves Simon do, a "creaturely politics" discerns that political community consists in the capacity to share common action amidst

[150] Susan Clark and Woden Teachout, *Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012).

the various differences that constitute a community. It is political judgment that mediates the pluralities of difference and the unity of common action. Judgment construed in distinctly democratic terms, I have argued, appreciates the ways conflict and affect contribute to the process of bringing an object of common judgment into view. For agonistic democratic communities, coming to judgment thus involves contestational and disputative practices of deliberation, empathic listening and affective attunement, and the patient endurance and use of conflict to yield common judgments. Agonistic communities like IAF organizations embody these kinds of practices in a way that generates a common life shared between disparate persons, institutions, and groups in a locality and sustains it over time. Democratic political communities of this kind manifest the ways conflict amidst difference can be generative of political community and contribute to its dynamic flourishing.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: Theological Agonistics

1. Agonistic Political Theology

This dissertation has proposed an agonistic political theology of radical democracy, one which locates democratic conflict within the goodness of creaturely social life. It has argued for an approach to thinking about democratic pluralism, of political community and difference, not in terms of divine analogy but with respect to the unique and dissimilar features of creaturely sociality and relation. Lived under the conditions of finitude, contingency, and embodiment, creaturely relations amidst difference are characterized by conflict. As creatures' multiple and various goods, desires, and courses of action come into conflictual contact with those of others, and as creatures find themselves in tension with others regarding these goods, desires, and courses of action, negotiating conflict is necessary in order for a common life to be had. Agonism, as I have called it in these pages, names the experience of these creaturely conflicts amidst difference. Agonism does not belong essentially to sin, injustice, or moral wrong, even as it can be exasperated by them. Instead, it is a feature of creation's goodness and inherent to the flourishing of creaturely social life.

Moreover, as creatures are ordered to share a common life with others, they must coordinate their diverse goods, desires, and courses of action and negotiate their differences in order to share judgment and action together. This is the essential mark of political community, to which creatures belong by virtue of their natural sociability and difference. Conflict, I have argued, is not opposed to political community but constitutive

of its dynamic flourishing. In particular, conflict plays a key role in the activity of arriving at shared judgment. Agonistic communities, I have shown, are political collectivities capable of incorporating successful conflict negotiation into their practices of generating common judgment and action.

This agonistic political theology has intended to show that flourishing democracy depends not on the resolution, transcendence, foreclosure, or preemption of conflict but on its cultivation and tending. Democracy, I have argued, needs not less but *more* conflict and in better forms. As the witness of the Industrial Areas Foundation shows, practices of facilitating democratic conflict can sustain communities of judgment and action, mediating their differences in a common life of political agency. Democratic community, I have maintained, is not threatened or undermined by conflict; it is itself a practice of well-negotiated conflict amidst difference. I conclude now with a reflection on democratic conflict as praxis of love.

2. Common Objects of (Agonistic) Love: Democracy and the Politics of Conversion

One of the central contentions of my account of agonistic community in the previous chapter was that judgment is arrived at agonistically. As I detailed in my analysis of IAF organizing practices, the work of bringing an object into view as a common object of judgment is a highly conflictual one. The agitation of one-on-one meetings, the contestation and argument of listening sessions, the challenges, critical examinations, and revisions of proposals involved in framing an issue, and the public uses of conflict in assemblies and accountability sessions all point to the ways arriving at democratic judgment is an agonistic practice. In agonistic community, judgments are

made by cultivating mutual attunement, appealing to *sensus communis*, and persuading others in perception. This activity is highly affective and conflictual, involving struggle over a community's common sense of the political world.

The central place of conflict in radical democratic politics often makes religious leaders and participants nervous about engaging in adversarial and agonistic democratic struggle.[1] Conflict is perceived as a sign of failure or disorder and so avoided or embraced only reluctantly. Lacking a means to conceptualize conflict in meaningful theological terms, religious democratic actors discern conflict to be a worldly reality, opposed to Christian love. I noted in chapter one Mary McClintock Fulkerson's recognition of the glaring absence of substantial reflection on conflict in the theological literature on democracy and democratic organizing. What is needed, she argued, is a rich theological account of democratic conflict that can sustain Christian participation in agonistic politics. This dissertation has intended to show how Christians might conceptualize conflict not, first and foremost, as belonging to sin but as a feature of the dynamic goodness of creaturely sociality. I conclude now with a theological interpretation of conflict in terms of love. I do so by returning to Augustine, and particularly Augustine's reflections on *caritas* and conversion.

Recall, in chapter one, it was Augustine whom President Biden and Michael Lamb saw as offering counsel for a democratic polity stricken by conflict, strife, and polarization. By turning our attention to the common objects of our love, they said, Augustine points us toward the possibility of social unity and harmony amidst difference. Love, they suggested, will heal our conflicts. Like Biden and Lamb, I also find in

[1] Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 48.

Augustine's theology of love a rich set of resources for thinking about democratic pluralism. But unlike their aspirations to unity and concord, I see Augustine as supplying theological tools for making sense of the goodness, creative possibilities, and generative potential of democratic conflict amidst difference. Love, I argue, *occasions* conflict, rather than resolves it. My contention here is that an Augustinian theology of love best conceptualizes the way agonistic communities arrive at common judgment through conflict. Specifically, it is by means of the *conversion* of loves, through conflictual negotiation of difference, that persons generate shared judgment. Because judgment is both affective and agonistic, in other words, it is best conceptualized theologically in terms of *love* and *conversion*.

Love, I suggest, following Augustine, refers to the fundamental desires of the soul which shape our orientation and relation to God, others, and the world, to the political, in particular, and to the activity of judgment, specifically.[2] Love, for Augustine, is prior to both willing and knowing, even as it grounds and manifests in these activities. Augustinian love, then, joins both affect and reason in the activity of judging; it is a kind of "cognitive affection," to use Oliver O'Donovan's term.[3] Likewise, conversion speaks to the way our loves are constantly undergoing re-shaping and re-ordering in social life, sometimes through redirection and other times by way of radical revision. Conversion is necessary for common judgment to occur, for in having our loves and those of others

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[2] On the relation of love and judgment, see Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), I.27–28.

[3] Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 15–16, 19. As Eric Gregory notes, "Augustinian *caritas* is not an emotional feeling that disrupts practical reason and political stability; neither is it only a disciplined virtue for spiritual elites. That human beings are lovers is an anthropological fact, and so ordinary to the human condition" (Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010], 248).

converted, they can become *common* loves. Something like a conversion of loves occurs, for instance, in what Benjamin Barber has described as practices of "strong democracy."[4] Similar to the forms of agonistic democracy I have detailed in this dissertation, these participatory and highly conflictual democratic practices are characterized by contestation and disputative reasoning and argument across difference. Over the course of deliberation, persons' hearts and minds undergo revision and change. But the changes participants experience usually have less to do with their intellectual, moral, or value commitments, Barber says, and more with their ways of perceiving and understanding their interests, desires, and aspirations.[5] In theological terms, their loves are converted, reordered. Charles Mathewes thus speaks of this aspect of agonistic politics as a kind of *askesis* of loves, even proposing that we conceptualize agonistic politics, indeed *all* politics, as a "conflict about" and "struggle over peoples' loves."[6]

Thinking about politics and political communities primarily in terms of love, rather than simply rationality or power, is one of the signature moves Augustine makes in his *City of God*.[7] After evaluating Cicero's definition of a *res publica* in Books II and XIX—namely, that it is "an association united by a common sense of right (*iurus*) and a community of interest," and thus existing only where there is justice—Augustine

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[4] See Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

[5] Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 208–209.

[6] Charles T. Mathewes, "Faith, Hope, and Agony: Christian Political Participation Beyond Liberalism," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 127.

[7] In addition to Augustine, my account of love as a kind of political affect is indebted to Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 105–129.

concludes that neither Rome nor any other political entity has ever been a "commonwealth" in this sense, for "true justice is found only in that commonwealth whose founder and ruler is Christ."[8] "If, on the other hand," he counters, "another definition than this is found for a 'people'," a more realist account of the political might be possible, one which can make sense of politics as we experience it in the *saeculum*.[9] Retaining the Ciceronian formula, then, Augustine provocatively replaces the language of justice with that of love:

> [I]f one should say, 'A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love', then it follows that to observe the character of a particular people we must examine the objects of its love…And, obviously, the better the objects of this agreement, the better the people; the worse the objects of this love, the worse the people.[10]

Thus, in Augustine's view, Rome was a *res publica* insofar as it possessed a common devotion to glory; Athens, Babylon, and Assyria likewise can be called commonwealths, even though their common loves were less than noble.[11] And the heavenly city of God is the truest *res publica*, sharing God and God's peace as its common love and *summum bonum*.[12] The notion of "common objects of love," then, provides Augustine with a theological, social-critical category for discerning the logic and quality of any political community, how it is produced, constituted, and sustained.

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[8] St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), II.21.

[9] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24.

[10] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24.

[11] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24.

[12] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.11. On the *civitas Dei* as most authentic *res publica*, see Rowan Williams, "Politics and the Soul: A Reading of *City of God*," *Milltown Studies* 19/20 (1987): 55–72.

Augustine's appeal to love as an organizing principle of political life, it must be noted, is not an idealist move. Indeed, many have noted how his turn from Ciceronian justice to common objects of love is part of a much more deflationary and realist account of the political.[13] That political communities are ordered and organized by their loves is more or less a sociological reality, according to Augustine. It is discernment of the objects of that love that leads Augustine to make moral and political critique. As O'Donovan notes, for Augustine, "the love that forms communities is undetermined with respect to its object, and so also undetermined with respect to its moral quality: 'the better the things, the better the people; the worse the things, the worse their agreement to share them'."[14] So, then, both the *civitas Dei* formed by "love of God carried as far as contempt of self" and the *civitas terrena* formed by "self-love reaching the point of contempt for God" are equally shaped by the activity of love, even while fundamentally distinguished by the objects of their love.[15] Love, in other words, is simply what political communities *do*. The real question, in Augustinian terms, is how loves are ordered, shared, and directed toward objects of common concern.

For my purposes, forging common objects of love is a way of describing, in theological terms, what happens when persons bring an object of common judgment into view. In contrast to Rawlsian liberalism, in which common judgment is made possible by shared public reason, Augustine helps us see that common judgment is conditioned by the

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[13] See, for instance, Gregory W. Lee, "Republics and Their Loves: Rereading *City of God* 19," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011): 553–581, for a discussion of the significance of this for Augustine's political thought and its modern reception. Cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 89–112.

[14] O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 22.

[15] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.28.

affective-rational forging of shared loves. It is, in fact, the discovery and pursuit of common objects of love that *effects* common judgment, and so political community. Rather than presupposing agreement, common identity, or shared beliefs, in other words, political community is generated in the experience of forging common loves toward shared goods, what Luke Bretherton calls "substantive goods in which the flourishing of all is invested."[16] An object of common love, a shared good, can be as particular and local as a safe neighborhood, a clean public park, a well-functioning transit system, or as comprehensive and universal as a national healthcare system. What is important is that it is a public, rather than private, good, one which cannot be properly enjoyed without the others one shares that good with. This is the basis for saying that common objects of love effect or generate political community: as commonly loved, they bind one to others in their common use. Not, we should say, in any sentimental way, but as a social relation wherein communion and agonism, agreement and disagreement, contestation and common judgment all occur.

The "creative miracle" of coming to common love of such goods is, Oliver O'Donovan says, that "we become a 'multitude' no longer, but a 'people', capable of common action."[17] What is important here, for my purposes, is that Augustine's account of political community locates its substance not in a shared characteristic of its constituents more fundamental than their differences, but rather in the *objects* of their love and judgment. Again, O'Donovan notes the importance of this, for Augustine:

> Loving is the corporate function that determines and defines the structure of the political society; it is the key to its coherence and its organization. Loving *things*,

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[16] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 18.

[17] O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 21.

> not loving *one another*. Augustine also affirmed that members of a community loved one another; but that is a second step. The love that founds the community is not reciprocal, but turned outward upon an object.[18]

Political communities, in other words, are not characterized by solidarity or consensus in the abstract but by a commonness generated in shared judgment and action. John von Heyking further explains this relationship between political community and shared goods: in forging common objects of love with others, "our habits and predispositions intermingle to the point where we cannot conceive of those common objects of love independently of those we share them with."[19] Bonds of collectivity are thus forged out of common interest, love, and judgment.

Moreover, it is precisely because political community is constituted by common love that it is also *agonistic*. Discovering, sharing, and judging common things is, as I argued in the last chapter, a contentious and conflictual process. In theological terms, this is because coming to love things *in common* demands the conversion of our loves. Persons are complex creatures, "bundles of loves," to use Eric Gregory's language, and constituted by multiple, disparate, and sometimes contradictory desires.[20] Nothing guarantees the compatibility of these loves with others, especially not under the disordering of sin. In order for loves to be both rightly ordered and properly shared, then, they must undergo conversion. And because loves are not held lightly but are deeply felt and valued, coming to love *differently*, especially through forging shared loves with different others, will often be experienced as conflict. Conversion, in other words, is

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[18] O'Donovan, *Common Objects of* Love, 26.

[19] John von Heyking, "The Luminous Path of Friendship: Augustine's Account of Friendship and the Political Order," in *Friendship and Politics: Essays in Political Thought*, eds. John von Heyking and Richard Avramenko (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 121.

[20] Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 21.

experienced as *agon*. Priorities will be challenged, perspectives disputed, idolatries confronted, private loves made common, neglected responsibilities exposed, and prized objects of desire made vulnerable to change. Yet in the conversion of our loves alongside others, in their being redirected and reordered to more common ends, loves are deepened and made richer the more they are shared. And in coming to love objects in common with others, shared judgment and action toward them arises as a collective possibility. The conflicts and conversions of love, in other words, are generative of judgment, and thus political community.

3. Love and Conflict: Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King, Jr.

This agonistic theological construal of democratic politics in terms of love, conflict, and conversion is informed by another trajectory of Augustinian thought, one which emerges from theological reflection on liberative struggle and so is more attentive to the experience of conflict. This version of Augustinianism is articulated most powerfully by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both Gutiérrez and King saw that the praxis of liberation was necessarily contentious and conflictual, given that it involved the struggle for power and the conversion of political adversaries. But agonistic struggle is not opposed to the Christian love command; rather, it is the expression of it.[21] As Gutiérrez writes, "[A] situation that causes us to regard others as our adversaries does not excuse us from loving them."[22] Indeed, "evangelical charity" is required even of

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[21] See, for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 247; and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 156–171.

[22] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 161. In what follows, I am drawing from the section "Faith and Social Conflict," initially published as "Christian Fellowship and Class Struggle."

oppressed to their oppressors.[23] Yet it is precisely the demands of love that require direct confrontation, agitation, and working for the conversion of one's adversaries. For Gutiérrez, writing amidst anticapitalist movements for liberation, class conflict and struggle, when pursued for the sake of the common good, can be read as expressions of love and the struggle to convert the loves of one's antagonists. Because love and conflict are not opposed, the social praxis of charity in political communities stratified and structured by capitalist modes of ownership and production will indeed be intensely conflictual. "The gospel proclaims God's love for every human being and calls us to love as God loves," Gutiérrez writes. But lived out within the context of capitalism, doing so "means taking a position, opposing certain groups of persons, rejecting certain activities, and facing hostilities."[24] Indeed, loving one's enemies might entail the expropriation and redistribution of their productive properties, assets, and capital! Christian calls for "unity" amidst capitalism's antagonisms, Gutiérrez argues, ring hollow, for the social relations produced by capitalist patterns of ownership, work, and distribution continually perpetuate alienation and estrangement between persons. Absent serious attempts to address "the causes that bring about these social conflicts" and "the factors that produce a world divided into the privileged and dispossessed," no authentic charity can be had.[25] Christian love, then, Gutiérrez contends, must seek to liberate both oppressed and oppressors from the material conditions that perpetuate their opposition and antagonism. And this entails the real "conversion" of the oppressor to the common good and the good

[23] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156.

[24] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 159.

[25] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 159.

of the oppressed.[26] In the case of anticapitalist class struggle, this means building collective power, confronting the owners of capital, making demands, and agitating for the redistribution and restructuring of economic resources, property, and power. This, Gutiérrez insists, is the work of love, even as it is an agonistic praxis.

King shows another dimension of love's agonistic work and the importance of conversion. For him, while agonistic struggle sometimes involves bargaining, accommodation, and compromise, it is not primarily ordered to these but to something much more ambitious: shared judgment. Jason Springs notes, for instance, that King's adversarial practices of nonviolent direct action, inspired by Gandhi, did not often "involve negotiated settlement or merely mutually tolerable compromise."[27] Rather, King sought to engage "a potential enemy as an adversary to be lovingly confronted and repositioned," not in order to make a truce or to bring him to defeat, but to "bring him to his senses," to share a judgment.[28] The language of "sense" here recalls the critical importance of affect in coming to judgment, discussed in chapter five. In relations between adversaries, affective sharing can only be reached by a kind of conversion of perspective, value commitment, moral imagination, or structural position.[29] To arrive at common judgment—say, about the evils of Jim Crow racism—involves not a negotiated agreement or compromise but a conversion of love, the re-establishing of a *sensus communis*, a common "sense" which perceives racism as evil.

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[26] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 160.

[27] Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 253.

[28] Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 253.

[29] See Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism*, 111–112, for a similar reading of King.

The examples of Gutiérrez in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and King in the struggle against white supremacy are examples of seeking the conversion of adversaries from *sin*, through repentance, reparation, and justice. Agonistic politics sometimes involves enemy-love of this kind, calling the adversary to *metanoia*. Perhaps more often, though, the conflictual and agonistic process of coming to shared judgment involves not the conversion of sin and injustice—"disordered loves," we might say—but the more ordinary tensions and oppositions between our various loves, conflicts and incompatibilities regarding their objects. Yet it would be a mistake, I think, to see conversion as something only occurring in conflicts of the former kind. Conversion is much more natural. It is a capacity that comes packaged with our creation. The conversion of loves is the means by which the multiple, conflicting, and divergent desires, hopes, sensibilities, and intuitions belonging to us as creatures become aligned in the pursuit of common goods.[30] This experience of conversion, in fact, is at the heart of Augustine's spirituality, in which love plays such a decisive role. Conversion, for him, was not only a process of ordering loves disordered by sin, but more fundamentally a process of learning to rightly love all things in God. Likewise, agonism's conversions are defined not simply by the realities of injustice, sin, and alienation, even though these are important elements of democratic struggle. More basically, agonistics involves the conversion of our loves as we discover what it means to share judgment and action as political creatures.

[30] Consider, for instance, the way Pope Francis refers to solidarity as a "moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion." Solidarity, for him, is a natural capacity incipient in us, like all moral virtues, even as it entails conversions to the neighbor and the common good. See Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, accessed October 3, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/ documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, sec. 114, n87.

4. Agonism's Grace

Agonistic democracy is about the conversion of love. In conflictual negotiation and the struggle towards shared judgment, one's loves and the loves of one's democratic companions and adversaries undergo revision, re-ordering, transformation, and conversion. In terms of my agonistic political theology of democracy, loves are converted toward goods shared in common, or common objects of love. Of course, in the Christian tradition, there is one ultimate shared good, one object of love whose commonness exists by virtue of our orientation to it as the source of everlasting blessedness. The Triune God is the love toward whom all creaturely loves point and find their consummate fulfillment. The Christian exists on pilgrimage to this eternal love, ordering her various and multiple earthly loves to it along the way. On this pilgrim journey, every created good, every encounter with creation's graces, every creaturely relation can be an occasion of the soul's ascetic formation in the love of God. Even politics, as Augustine knew, is a domain wherein the people of God "serv[e] God even by their patient endurance" in the earthly city, and so learn to become eventual citizens of eschatological city of God.[31] Agonistic democracy is a politics wherein Christian pilgrims undergo the conversion of their loves in conflictual negotiation with difference. In enduring the agonistic politics of pluralism, they encounter the conflicts constitutive of creation's goodness and struggle toward common loves with others. If they allow it, their pursuit of common objects of love with these diverse others will be a political practice of spiritual formation, preparing them for that most common love of all, the Triune Lord who embraces all creation. In so

[31] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.26.

doing, they will be made vulnerable to love's conversions. In embracing democracy's conflicts, they will receive God's agonistic grace.

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