# RESPECTING PLURALISM:
# THE VALUE OF BEING VALUE-NEUTRAL

by

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## Abstract

Accepting radical pluralism as fact, cooperation between people with deeply opposing moral values and beliefs is necessary to coexist peacefully. This thesis builds on Chantal Mouffe's criticisms to argue that John Rawls's politically liberal approach to establishing a stable, well-ordered, and fair society amongst radically pluralistic people leaves hegemonies unnamed, making them incontestable, legitimizing justifications for actions that perpetuate systems of oppression, and inciting antiestablishment sentiments. Focusing on the dangers of hiding the political under a veil of "neutral" reason, it is shown that while conflict must indeed be made visible, the kind of constant conflict that Mouffe defends must be qualified with decency to maintain a harmonious enough relationship for continued cooperation. To fill in this lacuna in Mouffe's theory, Sungmoon Kim's analysis of Confucian incivility rooted in *ren* is explored as a way to engage in confrontation while protecting the possibility of cooperation. In order to show how the need for Mouffe and Confucian ideas return in real world situations, the theoretical discussion is applied to navigating disagreement about the morality of microaggressions. It is concluded that when faced with radically different positions on issues of morality or justice, engaging in visible conflict by employing a kind of reflexive and critical Confucian incivility is necessary for maintaining a cooperative society.

*Keywords:* radical and reasonable pluralism, political liberalism, liberal neutrality, agonism, Confucian incivility, power, justice, social order

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Like watching a fire from across a river

강건너 불구경하듯 한다

- A Korean Idiom

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Cooperation Amidst Radical Pluralism

Living together in a society requires cooperation among people who hold different and possibly deeply opposing values and beliefs. Establishing a society that is free of conflict, warfare, and oppression with pluralistic people despite differences has been an ongoing challenge for modern states. A political ideology that was developed in light of this challenge is political liberalism (Heath, 2020). John Rawls (1993), who has developed a seminal account of liberal politics, describes political liberalism[1] (PL) as a theory that aims to answer the following question: "How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime?" (p. xviii).

In contrast to perfectionist political theories that impose a state-sanctioned conception of the good, liberalism strives to enable unity and social order while allowing for plurality by eliminating major sources of internal discord and limiting state power to areas that are broadly acceptable to the general population (Heath 2020, p.119, 125). By remaining morally neutral with respect to the different conceptions of good, bad, right, and wrong that members of society uphold, liberal democracies claim to be able to avoid the kind of internal warfare and oppression that have existed under perfectionist regimes. In fact, Martha Nussbaum (2001) claims that when reasonable pluralism is accepted as fact, respecting others as equal political and social actors demands a doctrine like PL that is able to establish political principles "around a partial moral conception that is 'free-standing,' not provided with any particular set of metaphysical or epistemological foundations" (p.887).

Various philosophers have questioned liberalism's ability to successfully absolve conflict by remaining neutral with regards to different comprehensive doctrines held by members of society. In this thesis, I will discuss critical responses to liberalism from two vastly different traditions: Chantal Mouffe's agonism and Confucian incivility. The agonist theorist Mouffe claims that the neutrality of liberalism is, in practice, counterproductive. Mouffe (2009) argues that by relying on rationality to "eliminate its adversaries while remaining neutral," Rawlsian liberalism hides conflict by determining one idea as reasonable (p.8). Thus, according to Mouffe, while PL allows for consensus to be reached in a seemingly morally neutral way, the hegemonic group is in fact acting in exclusionary ways and

[1] While political liberalism is a diverse doctrine, in this thesis, I focus on Rawls' theory.

hindering the formation of real political alternatives (p.12). Mouffe argues that this lack of real options in the political system is vulnerable to exploitation by, for example, "right-wing demagogues" who present themselves as "the only alternative to the establishment" (p.10). As I will show in more detail in chapter 3, Mouffe ultimately defends that liberal neutrality only exacerbates the challenges of governing radically pluralistic societies by making it impossible to challenge the status quo and inciting antiestablishment sentiments, demonstrating the need to make conflict visible. While I agree with Mouffe that conflict must be made visible, I argue that her discussion of agonistic confrontation requires a more robust understanding of stability and harmony required for cooperation.

Confucianists also discuss the ineffectiveness of liberal neutrality, but unlike Mouffe, focus more on promoting good and maintaining civility through social harmony. Confucian philosophers such as Joseph Chan (2002) describe liberalism as morally thin, and thus, unable to provide content-dependent justifications for action. Yong Huang (2015) argues that this moral thinness makes liberalism unable to promote benevolence towards others since it can only rely on penal code to suppress harmful actions (p.203). Due to liberalism's focus on remaining neutral with regards to the value of various doctrines, Confucian thinkers have argued that liberalism overemphasizes the value of negative freedom and autonomous decision-making at the expense of promoting good (Lee, 1996: Chan 2002). In attempt to develop an account of democratic theory that is able to better encompass the promotion of good without perfectionist oppression, Sungmoon Kim (2014) discusses a kind of Confucian incivility that is able to cultivate morality while maintaining the kind of harmonious relationships that are necessary for cooperation. In chapter 4, I elaborate on Kim's conceptualization of Confucian incivility to provide a notion of harmony that Mouffe's agonism needs in order to establish and maintain a stable society among radically pluralistic people.

## 1.2 Microaggressions

The need to find a way to peacefully coexist with radically different members of society is notably visible in the public discourse about social issues. In order to expose the limitations of liberal neutrality highlighted by Mouffe and Confucian thinkers, I will explore these critical responses in the context of a specific phenomenon: harmful yet legal action against nonhegemonic groups who often lack the interpretative resources to articulate the injustice of their experiences and/or whose testimonies are discredited due to their subjective

relation with their experience. More specifically, I will focus on microaggressions, particularly within the context of the United States (US), where such issues have been the source of contentious, highly publicized conflict.

Microaggressive actions are described by philosopher Regina Rini (2018) as "a small insulting act made disproportionately harmful by its part in an oppressive pattern of similar insults" (p.332). This can range from someone not giving epistemic credibility to a female engineer's expertise in a male-dominated field to store owners following around a customer who they presume are likely to steal based on their race. On one hand, some are angry about the lack of social or institutional recognition and action against such acts, especially since narratives that discredit and dehumanize communities have long perpetuated oppressive systems and served as a foundation for violence. For example, despite the progress that has been made towards equity, a gender pay gap persists and racial profiling perpetuates over-policing of black and brown communities who are disproportionately subjected to state-sanctioned violence. Numerous articles have been written on how victims as well as bystanders can respond to microaggressive acts, suggesting that there is an increasing social awareness of the existence of such issues (Limbong, 2020; Yoon, 2020).

On the other hand, some argue that people are merely overreacting and do not have a right to not be insulted. Even if injustice is recognized in some cases, they argue that people must "grow a thicker skin" because it is still within the speaker's right to say things that may be hurtful but not illegal. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2015), for example, has praised an article by Bradly Campbell and Jason Manning (2014) that describes instances of microaggressions as a development of a culture of victimhood. Haidt (2015) argues that the rise in demands for protection from words and ideas that people "don't like" on, for instance, college campuses, is disastrous for education and mental health. Haidt explicitly argues against institutional action as being disproportionate to the harm done and fostering a detrimental victim mentality.

This brings me back to the problem discussed above in the context of radical pluralism: When there is such fundamental disagreement, what kind of normative political framework can be developed that accounts for injustice while respecting deep differences and maintaining social order? As discussed, liberalism aims to address this question by developing a political order that maintains a neutral position with respect to who is "right" in order to establish a stable, well-ordered, and fair society where people can socially cooperate despite disagreement.

Taking the existence of reasonable yet deeply opposing views as fact, I will argue in this thesis that PL's commitment to value neutrality overlooks the dimension of power and makes it unable to accommodate for the pains of social oppression. Microaggressions, as a subject of contentious debate between stances that arise from deeply opposing doctrines, will be referred to throughout the thesis to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of liberalism and alternative approaches presented by Mouffe and Confucian theorists. This means that my research question goes as follows: How can Rawlsian PL accommodate for social and political conflict about issues of justice in radically pluralistic societies? How convincing are critical responses to liberal neutrality, based on Mouffe's agonism and Confucian other-regarding ideals?

## 1.3 Structure

I will answer this research question in four chapters. In chapter 2, I examine Rawls's politically liberal proposal for addressing disagreements within radically pluralistic societies. I observe that Rawls's commitment to moral neutrality overlooks a dimension of power that must be analyzed to expose the normative basis that perpetuates existing hegemonies. In chapter 3, I analyze how Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory elucidates the risks of relying on a concept of rationality to define the political and highlights the need for making conflict visible. While this better acknowledges the role of power, I argue that it fails to detail how people can productively engage in confrontation without dominant groups weaponizing their power and/or relationships being broken, thereby hindering the possibility of continued cooperation. In chapter 4, I explore how Confucian ideals focused on harmony can help reconceptualize our understanding of our relationality and provide a more robust approach to engaging in agonistic conflict. While Confucianism, as a perfectionist theory, is often interpreted as being intolerant of pluralism, I focus on the Confucian concept of incivility as described by Sungmoon Kim to illustrate how indifference or inaction towards injustice can be denounced while maintaining harmonious relationships and avoiding state sanctioned oppression. In chapter 5, I zoom in on the issue of microaggressions and demonstrate what the theoretical examinations in this paper entail for such cases. Drawing from the discussion on agonism and Confucianism, I analyze a possible normative framework for contesting such actions that does not rely on an overlapping consensus of harm and argue that the lack of a normative basis for state intervention does not entail that actors can claim a "right" to engage in microaggressive acts.

# Chapter 2: Political Liberalism

In this chapter, I draw primarily from the works of Joseph Heath (2020), John Rawls (1993), and Martha Nussbaum (2001) to analyze the history and motivation behind political liberalism in the context of radical pluralism. While general pluralism merely implies having differences, radical pluralism entails holding deeply and fundamentally opposing views that do not have any common basis. Examining what PL is will allow me to discuss the critical responses to liberalism as developed by Mouffe and Confucian thinkers in chapters 3 and 4, and then to apply these critiques to pluralistic analyses of microaggressions in chapter 5.

## 2.1 The Fact of Reasonable Pluralism

Heath (2020) describes liberalism as a political theory that was born out of the idea that when the fact of reasonable (a term I will return to below) and radical pluralism is realized, the only way to fully respect others as free and equal members of society is to develop a liberal state that does not impose a state sanctioned conception of good on their people (p.115). In other words, recognizing that people hold reasonable yet possibly opposing values and principles to guide their lives, liberal theorists aim to create a political system in which such people can embark on a cooperative venture to establish a stable, well-ordered, and fair society by remaining neutral with respect to the value of people's various comprehensive doctrines.

John Rawls is a political theorist who developed a seminal account of liberalism by starting from the claim that the existence of reasonable pluralism is indeed a fact. Rawls (2001) describes reasonable people as those who are "ready to propose, or to acknowledge when proposed by others, the principles needed to specify what can be seen by all as fair terms of cooperation. Reasonable persons also understand that they are to honor these principles, even at the expense of their own interests as circumstances may require, provided others likewise may be expected to honor them" (p.6-7). In other words, reasonable persons are people who "have realized their two moral powers to a degree sufficient to be free and equal citizens in a constitutional regime, and who have an enduring desire to honor fair terms of cooperation and to be fully cooperating members of society" (Rawls, 1993 p.56).

Based on this definition of reasonable persons, Rawls argues that while it may be unreasonable to "not honor fair terms of cooperation that others may reasonably be expected to accept" or to pretend to accept these terms while violating them discreetly for one's own advantage, such actions are not irrational (Rawls, 2001 p.7). While reasonability is tied with

realizing morality in cooperation, Rawls defines rationality as merely a deliberative or logical capacity (Rawls, 2005 p.417). In other words, rationality is "taking effective means to ends with unified expectations and objective interpretation of probability," while being reasonable demands acting in line with the moral requirements of the cooperative venture of society (Rawls, 2005 p.146).

## 2.2 Evolution from Classical to Political Liberalism

To provide a fruitful overview of PL and its focus on pluralism, I will now discuss the history of PL. While Rawlsian political liberalism has been influential in the formation of modern liberal democracies, Heath (2020) recounts how it evolved from what he refers to as "classical liberalism," which was introduced into public discourse by theorists like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Rooted in the idea that citizens enter a contract when living in society, classical liberalism initially focused on protecting supposedly neutral goods such as property and security that anyone within a society could agree to regardless of the concept of good they adhere to (p.118). This would allow the state to remain neutral since employing their power for these goods could be justified "without having to affirm the correctness of any particular controversial conception of the good" (p.118). In contrast with perfectionist states, "the purpose of the constitution is to provide an authoritative statement on the *limits* of state power" and the state would only be justified in acting for goods that everyone could surrender their "natural rights"[2] to (p.114).

Despite attempting to provide a political framework where radically pluralistic people could cooperate and establish a society, Heath (2020) argues that focusing on "neutral" goods and contracts made classical liberalism vulnerable to arguments against morality (p.115). Since the criteria for neutrality was merely agreement among people regardless of their conception of good, and because the state only had authority over what was neutral, Heath notes that the state could not exercise power for issues outside the neutrally agreed upon goods, no matter how seemingly unfair a situation was. For example, within a framework of classical liberalism, non-"neutral" goods, such as the protection of workers or provision of healthcare, would be considered outside the scope of state power, even if they are accepted as morally good things that society ought to pursue (p.115). As new social issues such as workplace safety or livable wages became more rampant with the industrial revolution and

[2] The notion of natural rights stems from the Lockean idea that we have certain rights "simply by virtue of being a person", independent of the existence of a state. For further discussion, see J. Donnelly. (1982). Human Rights as Natural Rights. *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, 4(3), 391-405. https://www.jstor.org/stable/762225

the need for state support grew, a new form of liberalism—modern liberalism—was developed to better account for the increasing discontent with classical liberalism's inability to address social ills (p.134).

Modern liberalism is accredited to theorists such as the above-mentioned Rawls who, rather than focusing on goods that are "neutral" to any comprehensive doctrine, develops an account of political order (referred to as political liberalism) that is able to address social ills by endorsing abstract principles of justice such as liberty and equality, with the aim of maximizing the common interest in a cooperative venture (Heath, 2020 p.143). According to Rawls (1993), this kind of political conception of justice is able to properly respect reasonable pluralism since it "offers no specific metaphysical or epistemological doctrine" (p.10). Rawls clarifies that establishing a political conception of justice does not imply that people cannot hold other values that apply to "the personal, the familial, and the associational; nor does it say that political values are separate from, or discontinuous with, other values" (p.10). Since a political endorsement of values like liberty and equality leaves room for people to maintain their own comprehensive doctrines, he defends PL as a theory that is able to "specify the political domain and its conception of justice in such a way that its institutions can gain the support of an overlapping consensus" of reasonable people (p.11).

Rawls draws a distinction between a mere modus vivendi and an overlapping consensus, arguing that the moral nature of the political conception of justice and the moral grounds on which people come to an overlapping consensus will create stability. Rawls (1993) describes a modus vivendi as a treaty that two parties adhere to for personal interests. In a modus vivendi, the only motivation for abiding by the treaty is that it is advantageous to be in it, so "both [parties] are ready to pursue their goals at the expense of the other, and should conditions change they may do so" (Rawls, 1993 p.147).

In contrast, Rawls (1993) argues that an overlapping consensus is more stable because it is the conclusion that reasonable people come to when they recognize the fact of reasonable pluralism and aim to respect others who hold reasonable comprehensive doctrines. According to Rawls, "[a]ll those who affirm the political conception start from their own comprehensive view and draw on the religious, philosophical, and moral groups it provides" to affirm the overlapping consensus (p.147). Since reasonable people affirm the overlapping consensus of the political conception of justice on the grounds of their own comprehensive doctrine independent of self-interest, Rawls believes that people will be in support of it even if "the relative strength of their view in society increase and eventually become dominant" (p.148). In other words, reasonable people in a politically liberal society will not weaponize the

dominance of their views since they uphold the ideals of liberty and equality as moral objects and on moral grounds, regardless of the benefit it brings to them. Rawls's reliance on this notion of reasonability and its relation to the dominance of views will return in Mouffe's critique presented in chapter 3.

## 2.3 Rawlsian Political Liberalism in the Context of Issues of Justice

I now want to focus on issues of justice, which are crucial to discuss in light of the critique developed by Mouffe and Confucian theorists. Philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum (2001) have defended the need for this kind of Rawlsian PL in discussing contemporary issues of justice such as gender equality, arguing that "the fact of reasonable pluralism supports a type of regime that [John Rawls and Charles Larmore] call 'political liberalism'" (p.887). Nussbaum emphasizes the need to ground political conceptions of justice in a public framework of reasoning so that society is structured around some rationale beyond the feasibility of agreement, and we can distinguish what is merely our own opinion from globally acceptable conceptions (p.897-900). This would imply that one cannot appeal to truth to justify a political doctrine, since this would require taking a stance on whether something like truth, in a metaphysical sense, exists (p.897). For example, Nussbaum defends that one should not base the claim that women should have equal opportunities to men on the claim that the equality of women and men (or the claim that the concept of gender is constructed and performative) is a fact, since accepting this reason requires taking a metaphysical stance (p.899).

Despite not being able to claim the truth of gender equality under political liberalism, Nussbaum argues in line with Rawls that PL is sufficient since it protects principles of justice within the political. Nussbaum (2001) admits that Rawlsian PL is "thin" in the sense that the most that it can say about, for example, the equality of men and women, is that it is "a political fact" but it "cannot say that this political conception is in turn built upon a deeper truth about human beings" (p.899). She seems to be aware that while modern liberalism, unlike classical liberalism, is able to address arguments against morality that are explicitly institutional such as equal employment practices, a Rawlsian liberal state remains unable to condemn social ills that are not overtly institutionalized such as members of society holding that women are not equal to men.

To illustrate this point, Nussbaum (2001) details how a politically liberal politician giving a speech to Southern Baptists who hold that "women ought to be ethically subordinate to men" should act (p.902). She argues that the politician should not condemn the religion for being sexist and unAmerican but rather, treat their comprehensive metaphysical doctrine with respect and "never say that it is a second-class or an unreasonable doctrine" as long as they fully affirm the political conception of equality (p.902). According to Nussbaum, even if I personally hold a comprehensive doctrine that men and women are equal, "for political purposes it is more respectful of our fellow citizens to stick with the limited but still admirable norm of political objectivity" (p.903). Nussbaum elaborates further, arguing:

> I believe that the equality of male and female is a metaphysical fact, but if someone's religion says otherwise, I believe that this view should be respected, provided that this person is prepared to sign on to (and genuinely, not just grudgingly, affirm) the political doctrine that men and women are fully equal as citizens—with all that follows from that, including fully fair equality of opportunity, guarantees of nondiscrimination even in private employment, equal access to the basic goods of life, and so forth. (p.901)

Nussbaum argues that although views about subordination should be recognized as "politically unreasonable" and thus not have influence over law, as long as those with such beliefs affirm the political conception of equality, they must be treated as "holding a doctrine that supports the overlapping consensus that regulates our political conception, and that in that sense respects the equal worth of [their] fellow citizens" (p.903). She emphasizes that the political conception of equality must be affirmed genuinely, alluding to Rawls's idea that an overlapping consensus can be stable if and when the object of consensus is a moral object that reasonable people endorse on moral grounds. This implies that no matter what metaphysical ideas people hold as true within the personal, familial, and associational, as long as they endorse the political fact of equality, the political principles of justice agreed upon by an overlapping consensus can be stably upheld and those who hold contrasting personal views should be respected as members of society.

While upholding liberal neutrality and tolerating the existence of opposing beliefs may be unsatisfying, being intolerant about intolerance can have dangerous consequences, especially when it impacts the way we conceptualize what is morally acceptable and the way we perceive other's moral character. Nussbaum (2001) warns that no single doctrine can prevail without force and oppression and Heath (2020) recounts Mill's description of political

history in which perfectionist logic justified oppression under the idea that "we may persecute others because we are right… they must not persecute us because they are wrong" (p.106). Thus, Nussbaum seems to suggest that although it may seem counterintuitive, the project of living together with reasonable others who hold radically different comprehensive doctrines requires everyone to compromise their values—the person who believes in female subordination must compromise their value in the political sphere, and the person who believes in equality between genders must compromise their value in the non-political sphere. Nussbaum (2001) argues that when we are faced with such disagreement, PL allows us to cooperate and live together in one society by adhering to the agreed upon political conception of justice without committing to any metaphysical or epistemological doctrine. According to Nussbaum, this does not support skepticism or relativism but rather, "it says that whatever we think about the resolution of this dispute, we can agree that it is a tough one, and that the arguments on both sides deserve our respect" (p.891).

## 2.3 The Overlooked Dimension of Power

The discussion by Rawls and Nussbaum suggests that establishing a stable, well-ordered, and fair society among radically pluralistic people requires a politically liberal approach to conflict about issues of justice. While tolerance can be helpful in some cases, in this thesis, I argue that structuring our society and relationships around a tenet of neutral tolerance for political purposes leads to overlooking systems of power and thus, perpetuating oppression in the name of order. If neutrality guides how we order society, tolerance would be seen as something to strive towards while what it means to tolerate would be determined by dominant narratives, putting the existence of nonhegemonic groups at the mercy of being tolerated by the hegemonic group.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) in a *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* expresses concern about the "white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.'" Within PL, this kind of bystander attitude where people do not interfere in what they deem objectionable for political purposes would be perceived favorably for upholding neutrality but, I will argue in the following chapters, legitimizes indifference and inaction that hinders the possibility for structural change regarding issues of justice.

To make this point, in the next chapter, I draw from Mouffe's political thought to explore the implications of fully acknowledging the dimension of power that exists within our society and elaborate on the limitations of PL. When the role that power plays is recognized, how can conflicts be properly addressed in a way that provides justice to those who are harmed, even if the actions are not within the realm of illegality and/or do not meet definitions of harm that are agreed upon by people who would be considered reasonable under Rawlsian definitions? On what grounds can we not be socially accepting of oppressive acts? If we have radically pluralistic societies, must we continue signaling that unjust ideologies are worthy of respect in the name of political order? Building off of Mouffe, I argue that a liberal ideology is not suited to structure radically pluralistic societies because it allows dominant groups to dictate the terms of cooperation, legitimizes justifications for perpetuating systems of oppression, and incites antiestablishment sentiments. In other words, PL serves to cement hegemonic practices, which Mouffe (2014) defines as "the practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed," by excluding other possibilities (p.181).

# Chapter 3: Agonistic Politics

In the previous chapter, I discussed how political liberalism aims to address radical pluralism and claimed, as a concluding remark, that its foundation in tolerance neglects a dimension of power that must be acknowledged in order to avoid privileging the status quo. In this chapter, I will substantiate this claim by drawing from Chantal Mouffe's theory on political agonism and highlighting the need to make conflict visible.

Chantal Mouffe is a political philosopher who defends an agonistic approach to establishing a society among radically pluralistic people. Broadly, Mouffe (2016) accepts conflict in pluralistic societies as ineradicable and argues that this conflict must be properly recognized within the political by translating antagonism (i.e., struggle between enemies) into agonism (i.e., struggle between adversaries involved in the same competition, where the goal is not elimination of the other but to be engaged in confrontation). This chapter is structured as follows: first, I explore the social ontology underlying Mouffe's agonistic theory, then I discuss the limitations of Rawlsian PL that this exposes, and finally, I examine the strengths and weaknesses of her approach in accommodating for disagreement about justice.

## 3.1 Mouffe's Characterization of Social Reality

Mouffe's political theory is based on her characterization of social reality as one in which conflict cannot be eradicated, in other words, one in which some sort of overlapping consensus cannot exist. She argues that social relations are a "breeding ground for antagonism" because creating an identity, e.g., saying that I am a woman, implies that I am different from those who are not of that identity and in doing so, provides an interpretation of what it means to be a woman (Mouffe, 2016 para.5). This suggests that the moment concepts such as "womanhood" or "justice" are defined, other interpretations are necessarily excluded. She argues that since providing an interpretation for concepts and identities necessarily affirms a difference, social reality can only be antagonistic in that there are always alternative conceptualizations that have been excluded to form this identity. Ugur Aytac (2020) describes this social ontology as one in which conflict cannot be reasonably eradicated because social reality is contingent (i.e., there are alternative ways to conceptualize it) and thus, every discursive formation is incomplete (i.e., always excludes possible conceptualizations) (p.4).

This social ontology is based on the Wittgensteinian concept of language games, which suggests that how we use words is constituted not by some neutral or objective meaning of the word, but rather by rules of a game that are shaped within the game but are not valid outside of the game (Aytac, 2020 p.8). In this lens, Mouffe categorically rejects the depoliticization of PL because, in her view, it fails to account for the fact that any rule, no matter how seemingly objective, is "vulnerable to the challenges of what is excluded" by virtue of being "based on the exclusion of other alternatives" (Aytac, 2020 p.4). Theorists of the same tradition, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, have used this concept of language games to argue that injustice occurs when one language game—one interpretation of, for example, what it means to live in a democratic society—trumps other interpretations based on the false assumption that the various games are commensurable (Lyotard & Thebaud, 1985 p.66-67). This would imply that the interpretations of freedom and equality that Western countries are founded on are inherently subjective and that imposing these interpretations on others as objective or most reasonable and promoting assimilation is unjust.

This conflictual, language-based conceptualization of social reality differs from the one underlying liberalism, which takes conflict to be inherently eradicable among reasonable people who can come to an overlapping consensus. The incommensurability of views, after all, means that the rational cannot guide us to arrive at the kind of consensus that is necessary for Rawlsian PL to function (Aytac, 2020 p.2). Arriving at an overlapping consensus of reasonable individuals requires a belief that we can arrive at norms and values that tell us how a good and just society can be organized by depending on rational reflection and communication. However, according to Mouffe's social ontology, the existence of radical pluralism means that a common denominator cannot necessarily be found for every conflict.

Of course, something not being practically feasible does not necessarily mean that it is not desirable. In fact, striving for some sort of consensus, no matter how challenging, may be necessary to not fall into relativism. Indeed, the language-based conceptualization of social reality and conflict has been criticized for leading to nihilistic relativism and implying that productive discourse between incommensurable language games is not possible (Aytac, 2020 p.5). According to this critique, taking everyone as a legitimate political adversary leaves us with a plethora of interpretations and meanings in which everyone, and therefore no one, is right or wrong. A "you do you, I'll do me" kind of mentality may be permissible for decisions that have no moral significance such as choosing a flavor of ice cream; however, it is ill-suited for ideologies and beliefs that have far reaching societal influence. Especially in cases of collective action problems such as vaccinations or climate change, everyone living

by their own interpretation of science would undermine attempts for cooperation. Or, for example, take the issue of abortion access. The beliefs of someone who views insemination as the creation of a soul whose vulnerable life must be protected and someone who views a fetus as merely a fetus cannot be reduced to a common denominator. According to Mouffe's agonism, both interpretations of life and liberty must be seen as politically legitimate, which would be susceptible to the critique that this results in nihilistic relativism. Thus, one may defend PL and the concept of arriving at a political standard or principle that transcends differences through reason as the ideal to strive for, even if naively idealistic.

Despite criticisms that Mouffe's social ontology leads to nihilistic relativism, recognizing everyone as a player in the game does not commit one to saying that everyone is somehow simultaneously the best or most-deserving player. Similarly, recognizing all views as legitimate and worthy of being included in the conflict does not entail that there is no objective or correct view. Rather, it avoids hiding behind a veil of neutrality and exposes conflict by naming the hegemonic, thereby making views contestable and recognizing the struggle that is necessary to convince others of the importance of one's interpretation.

This characterization of social reality recognizes pluralism as not merely existing but existing radically, in a way that cannot ever be fully resolved and is influenced by existing hegemonic practices. Based on this understanding of social reality as unavoidably antagonistic, Mouffe argues that conflict must be made visible by allowing it in the domain of the political (Aytac, 2020). In other words, all conflicting parties must be recognized as possible legitimate political adversaries. In addition to the argument that an overlapping consensus is impossible, Mouffe (2009) argues that if the social is depoliticized under a veil of neutrality and conflict is made invisible, then two problems arise: (1) there is no possibility for rearranging existing power relations and (2) antagonism has no democratic outlet leading to the rise of antiestablishment sentiments.

Defenders of PL argue that respecting others as equal and free political actors who have deeply opposing but reasonable beliefs entails that values such as liberty and equality must be confined to the political. However, in the next section, I examine how fully acknowledging the incommensurability of perspectives and making conflict visible uncovers the veil of neutrality employed by PL to expose a dimension of power that serves to privilege existing hegemonic structures.

## 3.2 Limitations of Political Liberalism

In this section I explore the risks that the invisibility of conflict poses for those who do not hold the same amount of power as those whose realities are aligned with the normalized. Building off of Mouffe, I argue that PL allows hegemonic groups to set the terms of cooperation and ideas of reasonability under a veil of neutrality that is made possible by drawing a false boundary between the political and social. Since neutrality leaves the hegemonic unnamed and thus, incontestable, justifications for taking actions that perpetuate systems of oppression are legitimized and rearranging existing power relations is made exceedingly difficult. In addition, I defend Mouffe's claim that antiestablishment sentiments are incited by depoliticization.

### *3.2.1 The Veil of Neutrality*

In defining the boundaries of the political by appealing to rationality, Mouffe (2009) notes that liberalism is able to exclude views while seemingly "remaining neutral" since the exclusion is justified when the excluded view is beyond the limits of the overlapping consensus reached by reasonable yet pluralistic people (p.8). However, claiming moral neutrality makes contestation impossible by any view that is deemed "unreasonable." In other words, the moral neutrality of political liberalism hides what is hegemonic, making it incontestable despite the fact that what is normalized is not necessarily neutral, but rather, the product of a political decision (Mouffe, 2009; Mouffe, 2014).

This veil of neutrality, according to Mouffe, is made possible by drawing a false boundary between the political and social. The success of political liberalism relies on the assumption that there is a clear divide between the political and social that allows for the formation of a "reasonable" overlapping consensus about political conceptions of justice. PL assumes that no matter what comprehensive doctrine people hold to guide their personal or social lives, they can commit to values of liberty and equality for all within the political sphere (Rawls, 1993 p.168). However, Mouffe's agonistic political theory shows that "[t]he difference between the social and political is an illusion--it's merely the invisibility of conflict" (Aytac, 2020 p.4).

In section 3.2.2, I defend that the division between the social and political is blurry by illustrating how (1) political ideologies influence social understandings of morality and (2) a person's beliefs, even if subconsciously, could impact others by influencing their political choices. In section 3.2.3 I argue that this not only problematizes the idea that some socially

neutral political conception of justice is possible to maintain but also allows the hegemonic group to set the terms of cooperation and makes the terms incontestable since the politics of the decision are hidden.

### *3.2.2 The False Boundary Between the Political and Social*

To substantiate the first point, the ideologies underlying our political institutions influence the way people conceptualize right and wrong, in turn impacting public discourse and what criteria are deemed acceptable to use to justify exclusion. To illustrate this, Heath (2020) discusses how the development of social contract theories and resulting moral frameworks of Kantian categorical imperative and utilitarianism not only influenced philosophy but also "generated, over time, a change in what was popularly regarded as right and wrong" (p.130-131). For example, when religious doctrines governed the state, understandings of sexual morality relied on teleological reasoning, resulting in conceptualizations of "natural" forms of sexuality that are "conductive to childbearing and child-rearing" as virtuous (Heath, 2020 p.131). Based on this point of departure, acts of marital rape could not be considered wrong since the act promoted the supposed purpose of sexual relations. Today, understandings of what sexual acts are ethical are commonly derived from ideas of consent. While consent started as a political idea, it has migrated "into the moral realm, to become a more general way of thinking about how relations between individuals should be ordered" (p.131).

A similar pattern of influence can be observed in the way we think about how to make institutions respectful of pluralism and navigate conflict. Whether it is social media companies, social venture organizations that aim to "do good," or universities, many institutions fall back on an idea of liberal neutrality as *the* ethical way to handle conflicting viewpoints. For example, I recently spoke with the co-founder of a social venture organization that was founded with an aim to "do good." In attempting to avoid being moral arbiters, they found themselves simultaneously supporting a client whose mission was to increase abortion access as well as a client whose mission was to limit abortions. While this sparked internal debate, leadership felt that remaining "morally neutral" with regards to the clients they supported was the best way to be respectful of the plurality of viewpoints that likely existed within their rapidly growing company. While this is only one example, it further illustrates how the ideologies underlying our political institutions do not remain isolated in a neat political realm and influence the way people conceptualize right and wrong.

In addition, the ability to be politically liberal despite "personal" beliefs relies on an unfounded assumption that people will be hypercognizant of their own ideological beliefs, further problematizing the idea that the political and social are neatly divided. In order to remain politically liberal, people will have to have a level of self-awareness and control required to keep their politically unreasonable doctrines out of the political domain. However, numerous psychological research papers point to the idea that countless external variables influence the way we perceive others and even ourselves, leaving people to act upon implicit biases even if they profess disagreement with the content of that bias (Nosek as cited in Fine, 2010 p.4-8). In this way, people are often not aware that they hold certain doctrines or how the doctrines they hold impact the way they act within the political, allowing them to deny any deviance from the agreed upon values of liberty and equality despite the influence the social has on the political.

### *3.2.3 Hegemonies are Unnamed, Incontestable, and Perpetuated*

In this section I will examine interpretations of liberty and Nussbaum's analysis of feminist issues to illustrate Mouffe's critique that employing Rawlsian PL to structure society leaves hegemonies unnamed making them incontestable and perpetuating systems of oppression. By illustrating the problems of PL highlighted by Mouffe, I set the stage for defending the idea that conflict must be made visible in section 3.3.

The lack of a strict divide between the political and social problematizes the possibility of political neutrality and reasonability that is necessary for the formation of the kind of overlapping consensus required in PL. When the veil of neutrality is lifted, the politicalness of rationality is exposed, problematizing "neutral" attempts to delegitimize challenges to the hegemonic by ruling them out as unreasonable or merely social. By leaving the influence of (implicit) doctrines unnamed and declaring that one's moral view is independent of outside influence, people's actions remain incontestable. In other words, no acts can be contested as long as people declare a commitment to freedom and equality, and as long as the interpretation of freedom and equality underlying this declaration aligns with dominant views that define the "reasonable."

For example, this kind of rhetoric has been used to justify controversial bans of Islamic head coverings in the name of feminism in countries across Europe such as the Netherlands (Schaart, 2019), France (Warner et al., 2020), and more (Müller, 2019). Since people profess a commitment to liberty, rearranging existing power structures is inhibited, which seems contrary to the aim of PL in establishing a society where people who are

radically different can peacefully coexist while being respected as equal and free. Furthermore, overlooking how the social is political not only makes the hegemonic incontestable but also cements the hegemonic by emboldening and legitimizing rights claims to justify actions that perpetuates systems of oppression as seen with the example of banning Islamic head coverings in the name of female emancipation.

Defenders of PL may argue that this interpretation of feminism is not politically reasonable; however, Nussbaum's discussion of who or what interpretation counts as reasonable is unable to convincingly articulate why. She borrows from Rawls's concept of political objectivity to argue that we can have a notion of *correct* judgments, which are not supported by a metaphysical doctrine of truth, but rather, is based on what is reasonable, or "supported by the preponderance of reasons specified by the principles of right and justice issuing from a procedure that correctly formulates the principles of practical reason in union with appropriate conceptions of society and person" (Rawls as cited in Nussbaum, 2001 p.895). Based on this concept of a correct judgment, we can arrive at a principle or interpretation that is reasonable to all rather than being "merely the opinion of some person or group" (Nussbaum, 2001 p.897).

While Nussbaum (2001) claims that the equality between, for example, men and women must be recognized in the political domain as objective, she does not provide any guidance as to how a *correct* interpretation of the concept of equality can be reached. While Rawls uses the term "reasonable" to refer to members of society who honor terms of cooperation in establishing a society of free and equal citizens, what terms of cooperation are truly "fair" or to use Nussbaum's term "correct" is contested by virtue of the society being radically pluralistic. Thus, functionally, "reasonable" refers to doctrines that are substantiated by reasons that a sizable group of people who are able to exercise power find convincing. As a result, her discussion of objectivity is unable to escape cementing interpretations that are already normalized or that the dominant group finds convincing.

By functionally accepting the hegemonic group's terms as reasonable, PL oppresses nonhegemonic groups by positioning them as the Other whose social power is at the mercy of the hegemonic group. While political and social institutions remain blameless under a veil of neutrality and tolerance, nonhegemonic groups must rely on being tolerated or accepted by those with power. When people profess certain reasons to substantiate their position or narrative as reasonable, reason serves as a universally and explicitly communicable tool. However, while the universality of rational communication presents it as a respectful approach to discourse, its universality also makes it prone to erasing the singularity of human

experience. Miranda Fricker (2007) discusses how there is a lack of hermeneutical resources to describe certain social experiences for which we do not have a social concept (p.1). In addition, certain people are also often seen as uncredible sources of information due to their association with a social group or the experience in question (p.1). This makes people vulnerable to an epistemic form of injustice where people's experiences are not discussed and their status as a knower is questioned. Thus, those who often are harmed by epistemic injustice will need to constantly provide proof of their rationality, leaving the burden to rationally explain why, for example, something traumatized the victim to the victim. This makes harm only valid if it is understandable by those who hold power, which puts the harmed in an impossible position of having to convince the dominant group that harm was caused (often by them) despite the fact that no shared language exists to be able to understand this harm.

While resolving such conflicts may not always strictly fall under the duty of the state, as shown, political theories underpin the way we think about what doctrines should be respected. Restraining conflict to what Nussbaum delineates as political allows for people to respond to efforts to keep people accountable for any harm they may have imposed on others with rights claims. For example, when someone who says that "women owe me sex" is met with criticism, they can justify voicing their doctrines by saying "it's my right to say this or do this" or "you don't have a right to not be offended". While the initial motivation for PL may have been establishing a stable and fair society among reasonable yet pluralistic people, liberal theories have relied on the idea of "rights" that people have such as a right to free speech to articulate what others should be respectful of. In other words, a focus on freedom defined by negative liberties and unrestricted choice sets has begun serving as a proxy for whether one is being respected for upholding their comprehensive doctrine.

Since other's doctrines and rights must be respected for political order within PL, one would have to respect people holding the doctrine that women exist for men's sexual pleasure as long as they are not causing explicitly political or bodily harm to others. In this way, PL breeds a culture in which ideologies that oppress others can thrive and creates a political order in which there can be no justified intervention until harm is effectively explained to the hegemonic group. Turning to the example mentioned in the introduction, any perpetuation of oppressive narratives by microaggressive statements would have to be tolerated until its link to violence becomes undeniable. Jean Hampton (1996) notes that in this way, the ideology of a liberal state is often used to justify oppression since limiting state power to what the dominant group deems a part of the political domain leaves space for "[preserving] forms of

social organization that severely disadvantage and/or discriminate against certain members of that society" in the name of protecting individual freedoms (p.194). In this way, "the state could become… a threat rather than an ally to the cause of liberty if it resisted opposing various discriminatory social practices out of concern not to compromise individual autonomy" (p.195).

As demonstrated, the line between the political and social may not be as clear as needed for PL to successfully establish a stable, well-ordered, and fair society among radically pluralistic individuals, resulting in an account of politics that cements the hegemonic and even justifies acts that perpetuate systems of oppression. It seems naïve to believe that people will maintain that those who hold fundamentally opposing views from their own are "reasonable" people as long as they remain committed to political principles of liberty and equality. Not only would compelling people to cooperate then become increasingly challenging, but requiring people to be respectful of those who hold viewpoints that belittle their humanity is also emotionally tolling and misplaces the burden of psychological labor on those who are being harmed. To develop a political order around this requirement is asking for polarization as it limits nonhegemonic peoples' abilities to exist with ease. Thus, ideologies like "women are subordinate to men" should not be respected in our society as a position that can be held as long as it does not interfere with *political* liberalism.

#### *3.2.4 Inciting Antiestablishment Sentiments*

In addition to cementing hegemonies and emboldening justifications for actions that perpetuate systems of oppression, Mouffe (2016) argues that the invisibility of conflict in modern society has resulted in festering antagonistic feelings, leading to, for example, the rise of nationalistic or xenophobic language. She claims that right-wing populism has flourished in part due to efforts to put an end to agonistic confrontation by avoiding defining adversaries, which has led to a lack of proper democratic outlets to voice one's passions. She expresses deep concern for this development since their call to discard current institutions implies an "'exodus' from given forms of democracy… [rather than trying to] engage with current institutions to make them more representative and more accountable" (Mouffe, 2016 para.4 in Democracy or Representation?).

Recognizing conflict as real and unavoidable, Mouffe argues that the rise of extremism should not be stopped through moral condemnation but "by offering solutions to those demands that are inspired by a search for equality and social justice" (Meyvis, 2019

para.9). Mouffe (2016) implies that antiestablishment extremism can be quelled by giving serious political channels for antagonistic feelings and not prepolitically writing positions off as not worthy of engaging with. In other words, conflict must be made visible not only to avoid strengthening hegemonic practices but also to make the continuation of society viable. Thus, Mouffe proposes turning invisible antagonism into democratic agonism so that serious political channels are available to express demands and concerns in a more productive manner.

## 3.3 How Does Agonistic Theory Aim to Address Injustice?

In support of her agonistic theory, Mouffe (2016) defends two related changes: (1) making conflict visible in the form of agonism and (2) establishing political outlets for all legitimate political adversaries. In the next section, I explore these proposals and how they can inform the way we handle disagreement about matters of justice.

Since, according to Mouffe, placing limits on plurality under a veil of neutral reason and incontestably depoliticizing the social merely exacerbates injustice and tension, she defends an agonistic political theory. Although Mouffe (2016) argues that conflict must be made visible to build a functioning society among radically pluralistic people, she emphasizes that it must not take the form of antagonism but rather, agonism. In other words, as long as everyone involved shares a "common allegiance to the democratic principles of 'liberty and equality for all,'" people can engage in a fight to make their interpretation of such principles hegemonic without questioning the "right of their opponents to fight for the victory of their position" (Mouffe, 2016 para.3 in An Agonistic Model). By converting the antagonistic nature of social reality into agnostic politics, Mouffe argues that everyone will be fully respected as equal political/social actors, enabling the peaceful coexistence of radically pluralistic people "without denying the potentially antagonistic nature of social relations" (Aytac, 2020 p.3).

### *3.3.1 How Power Can Be Shifted Within Agonistic Theory*

Contrary to political liberalism, agonistic politics does not require people to be respectful of fellow citizens who may hold deeply opposing views as long as they uphold PL but rather, requires respect for an adversary's efforts to fight for their view. Since the fight is respected, while challenges to the status quo can be easily depoliticized or deemed "unacceptable" under PL, under agonistic politics, challenges should theoretically be

respected. Thus, unlike PL that serves to cement existing power structures, Mouffe (2016) holds that power can be shifted within agonistic politics when new interpretations are developed and more people find new or different interpretations more convincing. Based on Mouffe's social ontology, this fight can be seen as a battle to make one's own language game hegemonic.

Similar to how words keep changing meaning because of shifting historical and cultural context, power shifts can occur as interpretations of what it means to live in a democracy keep changing, resulting in a continuously changing list of meanings that gain hegemony by replacing previous meanings. There could be many reasons that someone might be convinced of an interpretation beyond it stemming from rationality. For example, someone may find a new interpretation of what it means to have liberty convincing because it enables them to shape themselves and their identity as political actors in a stronger way. In contrast to PL, by acknowledging the currently dominant interpretation as hegemonic and allowing other interpretations to exist as well, agonistic democracies create space within the political arena where the norm can be challenged (Mouffe, 2016).

Critics may question whether power can truly be shifted in this way despite hegemonies. While conflict is recognized, similarly to PL, this conceptualization of how power can be shifted seems to place the burden to fight for one's interpretation on the people who have been oppressed or subjected to injustice. In other words, it remains the responsibility of the aggrieved to surmount epistemic injustice and present their interpretation in a way that convinces enough others for it to become the dominant point of view, calling into question the strength of agonism in shifting power. However, defenders of Mouffe's agonistic theory may argue that in comparison with liberalism, agonism is at the very least able to accurately capture this aspect of how power shifts. Furthermore, ideally, Mouffe (2016) claims that this conflictual dimension of our social reality should be institutionalized by representation so that no matter how nonhegemonic an interpretation is, there is a serious political channel through which a case can be made for this interpretation. This would create a systematized way for those who are often subjected to epistemic injustice to be taken seriously. Thus, while the burden of convincing may continue to fall on the aggrieved, their struggle would be recognized and the political legitimacy of their fight would not be questioned, creating a real opportunity for shifting power. In addition, antiestablishment sentiments would not be incentivized since people would have democratic ways of engaging in confrontation.

### *3.3.2 Agonistic Use of Reason*

While Mouffe's agonistic theory is critical of how PL employs rationality to act in exclusionary ways and hide conflict, I want to argue in the following that an ability to reason remains crucial to building a cooperative society through the agonistic struggle. I clarify the limited role that reason should take in agonistic struggle such that it does not fall into the same problems that PL ran into.

Mouffe (2016) describes the aim of democratic politics as "the construction of 'a people' [or] a collective will" and argues that this collective will can be established through an agonistic struggle. According to Mouffe, "this 'people' can be constructed in different ways, and what is at stake in the agonistic struggle is precisely the chain of equivalence through which the collective will is to be established" (para.7 in Beyond Left and Right). While this conceptualization of democratic politics avoids depending on a hegemonically-grounded definition of rationality, reason remains crucial for translating antagonism to agonism, not because some mode of universal communication is necessary but because cooperation is not always intuitive.

This idea of democratic agonistic conflict requires taking reason seriously since it requires people to support decisions that may not align with their goals. In analyzing the postmodern loss of faith in reason, Heath (2014) argues that reason is necessary in order to be able to override our intuitive response to conflict and live in a large-scale civil cooperative venture. Moreover, Heath (2014) claims that as the number of people who must cooperate increases and people's influence becomes increasingly anonymous, social pressure becomes ineffective, making the group vulnerable to defection and recrimination (p.149).

To illustrate the challenge of large-scale cooperation, Heath (2014) gives the example of overfishing, a situation in which everyone blames someone else for the damage that is done. He notes that while ethicists can theorize about who should bear the responsibility and the concept of blame, the reality is that the people involved will likely rationalize their own position and refuse to stop unless others stop, or apologize, as well. Heath argues that the only way to solve such problems is for "everyone, including you to stop what they're doing, and that means providing a benefit to the very same people who have, in the past, harmed you" (p.151).

Heath (2014) recognizes that the cooperation necessary in a large-scale venture is highly unintuitive and argues that only reason can lead us to the realization necessary for cooperation, namely "that other people are not evil but are in fact acting on the same set of motives that we have" (p.151). This kind of reasoning is unnatural, "[s]o while it has the

potential to free us from the state of nature, there is no reason to expect this process to be easy. The great thinkers of the first Enlightenment tended to believe that once prejudice and superstition were overthrown, reason would naturally take their place… We now know that this isn't true" (Heath 2014 p.52). Yet, embarking on a civil cooperative venture requires us to reason since without it, democracy as an act of cooperation would not function. If defeat is never accepted and people threaten secession as a result of losing the fight, they are "in effect undercutting and renouncing the democratic form of decision making" (Hampton, 1996 p.248). This is similar to the danger that Mouffe (2016) describes about the growing rhetoric that promotes leaving existing forms of democracy to show disagreement rather than engaging with it to make institutions more representative and accountable.

This use of reason does not entail that power must be relinquished to whoever currently has it; however, its ability to avoid cementing existing power structures relies on the institutionalization of the dimension of conflict via representation (Mouffe, 2016). This would mean that people would have those who represent their doctrines within the political system such that there is a democratic way of challenging the current dominant view. While Mouffe does not detail how such representation can be achieved if it does not yet exist and there are structural barriers to attaining it, engaging in civil disobedience for greater representation seems consistent with agonistic political theory. Although civil disobedience may lie outside channels within established political institutions, voicing alternative interpretations of, for example, what it means to live in a democracy, must be recognized as legitimate and not be met with force since those voicing their interpretation in this way are not engaging in private use of force against those who have harmed them but rather, aiming to make their interpretation publicly recognized. In this way, when representative political outlets are established, the possibility of shifting power such that unjust hegemonic practices are not cemented can be protected through reasoned agonistic politics.

### 3.4 Limitations of Mouffe's Agonistic Theory

While Mouffe's agonistic conceptualization of politics may better capture the conflict between people who hold deeply opposing views and thus pose less risk of cementing existing power structures and inciting antiestablishment sentiments, it has been met with numerous criticisms. Most notably, it has been criticized for (a) not being able to completely avoid the necessity of some minimal consensus, (b) merely providing a critique and not a robust alternative political system, and (c) being overly permissive (Aytac, 2020 p.4). While

the first two critiques are outside the scope of this thesis and have been indirectly addressed in my discussion of relativism in section 3.1, the topic of radical pluralism and value neutrality makes the third critique particularly pertinent and is addressed below.

### *3.4.1 Drawing Boundaries with a Language-Based Approach*

This third critique entails that Mouffe's theory is unable to exclude any perspectives, no matter how far removed from reality. Aytac (2020) elaborates on this critique and argues that Mouffe's idea that all interpretations must be considered legitimate political adversaries results in there being no prepolitical normative criteria for evaluating and rejecting problematic instances of politicization (p.5). For example, the alleged causal link between vaccines and autism could be constructed as a political conflict, not merely an epistemic disagreement. Then, under Mouffe's agonistic political theory, this stance must be recognized as a legitimate political adversary no matter how ungrounded it is. In other words, since there are no prepolitical standards of justifiability, it is not possible to "critique such instances of politicization, which rely on false empirical beliefs and incoherent ideological convictions" (Aytac, 2020 p.6).

To address this concern of being overly permissive, Aytac (2020) proposes a Wittgenstein-inspired approach for assessing unwarranted uses of language. Instead of categorically rejecting depoliticization, Aytac defends establishing prepolitical standards to draw boundaries by evaluating whether the language use is warranted according to Wittgenstein's understanding of language, which suggests that language is always situated in a socio-historic context, and that this same context determines the meaning of the concepts and words that are used. According to this view of language, what is therefore binding in our language use is "how a certain notion is regularly used" (p.8). Thus, Aytac proposes assessing whether a certain use of language is warranted against rules derived from relevant social practices, rather than against what community members interpret the term to mean. Based on this understanding of legitimate language use, when an instance of politicization relies on an unwarranted use of language, it would not be considered a legitimate political adversary (p.10).

Aytac (2020) provides a few examples of what may count as unwarranted uses of language. According to Aytac, since climate denialists and antivaxxers' use of the term "scientific truth" is not coherent with the social fact of how the term is regularly employed, their views can be depoliticized (p.7). Aytac also continues this line of reasoning to argue that

Islamophobic arguments that employ interpretations of equality and Islamic identity do so in a way that deviates from "the shared semantic standards of the community" and thus, should also not be considered legitimate political adversaries (p.13). Aytac quickly clarifies that this language-based approach does not run the risk of cementing hegemonies by prioritizing "the established meaning-making practices" since language use is complicated, and the correct use of concepts depends not only on how the term is employed in a variety of circumstances but also how it is related to other concepts (p.12). Thus, Aytac argues that meaning can still shift from the hegemonic interpretation as context and the relationship between concepts change (p.12).

### *3.4.2 Risks of Drawing Prepolitical Boundaries*

While Aytac's discussion points to a real concern about being overly permissive, I want to argue that its reliance on language to depoliticize risks inciting antiestablishment sentiments and does not address weaponizations of power. For example, Aytac argues that the view of equality and Islamic identity that deviates from operative concepts should not be considered a legitimate political adversary even if it is the dominant narrative that exists in mainstream Western media. While it is unclear what delegitimizing the view that holds power could look like, the kind of depoliticization that Aytac is defending also runs the risk of resulting in powerful antiestablishment sentiments that can become dangerously antidemocratic.

When this sentiment is weaponized by people who have historically and structurally wielded power, there could be adverse consequences for the group that the depoliticization aimed to protect. Even if privileging one's own language game is less likely to go unnoticed when the hegemony is unnamed, the hegemonic group are still capable of weaponizing their power. Thus, while perhaps unfair, Mouffe's conceptualization of the political realm as a competition among views may capture important aspects of struggle without inciting people to weaponize their power. In other words, being overly permissive may be necessary to avoid situations where festering antagonistic feelings are employed dangerously.

## 3.5 The Absence of Harmony

Above, I have argued that the boundary between the political and social that is required for political liberalism to succeed is questionable and examined how lifting the veil of neutrality exposes the ways in which PL not only cements the hegemonic but also boldens language that justifies oppressive acts. Thus, I conclude that we must move forward from the

depoliticization of PL and make conflict visible thereby enabling the hegemonic to be contested.

Aytac's motivation behind developing ways to exclude unwarranted language use seems to be to ensure that political discourse is productive and is not muddied by including perspectives that oppress or is based on outrageously false information. However, it has been argued that this fails to avoid Mouffe's concern about inciting antiestablishment sentiments, which can be particularly harmful if done by those in hegemonic positions, demonstrating a need to embrace the conflictual dimension of our social reality.

Although making conflict visible may play a crucial role in establishing a stable, well-ordered, and fair society, sustaining the level of cooperation required for maintaining society amidst people with opposing views while engaging in confrontation also necessitates that people engage with some level of decency. While Mouffe's agonistic politics provides a better alternative to conceptualizing how a society can be established among radically pluralistic people, she does not provide a discussion on how such cooperation can be maintained while engaging in constant confrontation. Fights about issues of justice, by virtue of being deeply personal, are particularly contentious and prone to creating ill will between those engaged in conflict. As argued in section 3.2.3, an excess of ill will can be detrimental to people's ability to cooperate.

If conflict cannot and should not be eliminated and thus, people are always "fighting," how can we avoid the deterioration of possibly cooperative relationships necessary for sustaining society? Can we foster harmonious relationships while being engaged in confrontation about moral (and often deeply personal) topics? In attempt to address this question, rather than trying to draw boundaries to the political and risking the incitement of antiestablishment sentiments, I argue that we must explore how to engage in conflict in a way that is productive and makes continued cooperation possible. In the next chapter, I explore how Confucian relational values and emphasis on moral cultivation can help inform agonistic conflict so that harmonious relationships for cooperation can be maintained.

# Chapter 4: Confucian Incivility

In the last chapter, I defended the need to make conflict visible by building on Mouffe's agonistic theory and illustrated the need to engage in conflict in a way that makes continued cooperation possible. In this chapter, I draw similarities between Mouffe's call to engage in confrontation and Confucian incivility as conceptualized by Sungmoon Kim that has a greater orientation towards social harmony. Based on the idea that incivility is necessary for a viable civil society, I explore how incivility is conceptualized within Confucianism and how this can inform the way we engage in confrontation.

## 4.1 What is Confucianism and How Does it Conceptualize Social Relations?

Confucianism is a theory that was developed in ancient China with the aim of unifying and maintaining social order amidst a period of constant war. Confucius theorized during the warring states period of Chinese history and became central to an incredibly influential intellectual movement. Confucius' ideology, synthesized largely by disciples such as Mencius, is famously discussed in the *Analects*. Given its similar motivation to PL, in this section, I analyze Confucianism as an approach to how people who are in constant, incommensurable disagreement can live in social harmony.

In contrast to PL's focus on neutrality or rational consensus, Confucianism emphasizes the role of moral cultivation in achieving social order and living peacefully. In promoting moral cultivation, Confucianism paints a vision of a good life revolving around the concept of *ren* (仁), which is often translated as humanity or love. Due to this emphasis on a developed idea of good, Confucianism is often interpreted to be supportive of an intolerant, authoritarian regime (or at the very least, a regime that neglects individual autonomy) that operates on an ideology of state perfectionism (Chan, 2002 p.293). It therefore seems to conflict with several core values of PL: as discussed in chapter 2, the main motivation for developing liberal political theories was because perfectionist political theories, such as those centered around a religion, historically resulted in oppressive states that persecuted those who disagreed with their conception of good. Regrettably, in modern day, Confucian perfectionist ideology is also often employed to perpetuate, for example, patriarchal systems in East Asian societies, motivating many women who have lived in a world constructed on these traditions to be wary of Confucian values (Nussbaum, 2012 p.46).

However, following Slingerland's (2011) disclaimer on "adapting ancient modes of thought to the modern world," (p.418) the oppressive employment of Confucianism does not

entail that nothing can be learned from its other-regarding approach and focus on harmony. Like how Hobbesian social contracts may still be worth analyzing despite his promotion of authoritarian rule or how Marxist theories of labor may still provide insight despite the oppressive regimes his political thought inspired, as a comprehensive doctrine aimed at creating peace among warring ideologies, Confucianism's focus on moral cultivation and harmonious social relationships may provide valuable insight into how to engage in the kind of constant confrontation advocated for by Mouffe without aggravating relationships and making cooperation increasingly difficult. While Confucianism is an incredibly complicated theory that has been interpreted in a myriad of ways over the past 2500 years and is by no means one uniform doctrine, I will focus on the harmony-oriented notion of incivility to provide insight into how to accommodate for radically pluralistic views about matters of justice.

The Confucian focus on harmonious social relationships is grounded in "a normative claim that human flourishing is constituted by social relations of certain kinds, so that we have an obligation to nourish those relations" (Bell & Metz, 2011 p.82). The concept of *ren* remains central in most Confucian conceptualizations of virtuous or ideal relationships. Confucianism considers all human (social) actions to be morally meaningful (Lee, 1996 p.374), but in particular, family units are emphasized as central to conceptualizing not only stable parent-child relationships but also how a state should be arranged. Within the context of the pre-industrial, hierarchical society that Confucius was writing in, families were the "most important unit of economic production and the basic node in society's network" (Chan, 2002 p.303). Thus, Chan claims that the Confucian focus on familial relationships was natural. Scholars like Joseon-era thinker Dasan understood states as emerging from multiple families joining forces and electing a chief, motivating the idea of drawing the ideals of state governance from the ideals of a familial relationship (Yi, 2017 p.161). In this sense, other members of society are also seen as people with whom we share familial ties and whose relationships should be guided by familial norms and ideals.

Confucian conceptualizations of a virtuous familial relationship are complex and diverse. A central concept is the ideal of *xiao* (孝), or filial piety, which demonstrates an embodiment of *ren* in a parent-child relationship. While *xiao* is often erroneously associated with uncritical adherence to parental figures, Confucianism emphasizes critical reflection in part of both the parents and the children. Mencius, one of the most influential ancient interpreters of Confucian teachings, presents a discussion of *xiao* that depicts parents as

imperfect characters who should be held accountable when they make mistakes so that harmonious relationships can be maintained. According to Mencius, "'[w]hen one is unresentful despite the fact that a parent's fault is great, the sense of estrangement is deepened. When one is resentful despite the fact that a parent's fault is small, an unwarranted obstacle is created. To deepen estrangement is to be unfilial and to create an obstacle is also unfilial'" (Mencius 6B3 as cited in Kim, 2014 p.149). In this sense, *xiao* implies that hiding conflict out of "respect" for others is detrimental to sustaining a possibly harmonious relationship.

*Xiao* is often interpreted as obligating people to respect and subsequently abide by the words of those who are older than them, however, the elderly are held in high esteem in Confucian philosophy not inherently for their age but because age is seen as a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for moral improvement. Confucian writings can be interpreted as presuming the moral imperfectness of all people and emphasizing the need for intentional engagement in cultivating one's morality. Age is seen as crucial for moral cultivation because it provides time to have a vast array of experiences to reflect on but not considered sufficient because "moral improvement takes place on the assumption that one is motivated by the quest for self-improvement (and one's mind allows for that quest to take place) and that one stays socially involved and learns from new forms of social relations" (Bell & Metz, 2011 p.91).

Kim (2014) expands the implications of *xiao* to building a political order, arguing that "as a filial son or daughter becomes truly filial by undergoing moral reflection evoked by affective resentment, in Confucian democracy a citizen becomes civically empowered when he or she is reflective-critically attached to the polity" (p.152). In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how a Confucian understanding of moral cultivation may help inform how to productively and harmoniously engage in conflict with people who hold deeply opposing moral views from our own.

## 4.2 How is Conflict Addressed within Confucianism?

In this section, I explore Confucian ideas of relationality and its implications that morality must be cultivated. I argue that rooting relationships in *ren* suggests that we must engage in incivility in situations of moral wrongness, while remaining reflective and aware of the possibility that we cannot understand the entirety of another's experience.

### *4.2.1 Balancing Liberal Rights Claims with Decency*

By starting from a Confucian point of relationality, what it means to be respectful in the face of ineradicable and incommensurable conflict can be reconceptualized. Famously, liberalism is often criticized for employing an atomistic understanding of the self that neglects how people are social beings that need society to realize their full potential (Taylor, 1985 p.197). However, we have to be careful with this critique: Kim (2014) argues that Rawls's liberal conception of the self is in fact social in that they are able to "participate in the social contract, a uniquely modern moral and political arrangement of the common life" (p.33). This seems to be reflected in Rawls description of reasonable people who can cooperate with one another to come to an overlapping consensus about the political conception of justice that governs their democracy. Rawls (1993) argues that the ideal of a constitutional democracy as outlined by PL relies on there being people "who have an enduring desire to honor fair terms of cooperation and to be fully cooperating members of society" (p.56). This suggests that Rawlsian PL does not see people as disconnected, asocial beings but rather, people who are capable of engaging in a cooperative venture for the foundation of society.

Nevertheless, Confucianism enables us to see how this understanding of the social self still fails to capture and promote the basic decency with which we must treat each other for the continued success of cooperation, even if it is within someone's "right" to not treat someone decently. Huang (2015) argues that within a liberal society, the beliefs and actions of all people are seen as morally equivalent as long as they are following the established rules (p.197). In contrast to this moral apathy, Huang (2015) describes how Confucianism advocates for the government to also help "cultivate virtues among individuals" due to the recognition that "the political is personal: the rules that aim to deter people from causing harm to others will determine not only what kind of society there is but also, to a great extent, what kind of people live in the society. A government that regulates individuals' other-regarding action primarily or even exclusively through punitive laws will not only be unable to make people virtuous but will also tend to make them vicious" (p.197). Lee (1996) also voices similar sentiments defending that "unlike the liberal priority of the right over the good, Confucianism gives priority to becoming a good person over being a right-claimer" (p.357).

While Huang takes the political also being personal to imply that the government has a duty to cultivate "good" people, the existence of radical yet reasonable pluralism calls into question whether cultivating virtuous people, even if agreed to be a governmental duty, can be achieved without having a perfectionist authoritarian regime that suppresses the plurality

of goods. This seems to not only presume a specific kind of moral psychology, but it also seems to be impractical given that what it means for people to be good cannot even be agreed upon. Thus, I would rather argue that the political being personal calls on us to intentionally engage in moral cultivation, be more critical of what patterns of behavior are legitimized or made normal by existing institutions, and be more mindful of the interrelatedness as we try to convince others of our view.

In order for cooperative living to be possible without cementing hegemonies or inciting dangerous antiestablishment sentiments, people—in particular, those in positions of social, economic, and political power whose realities are so rarely questioned—must be able to accept themselves as necessarily flawed from having been socialized in a punitive and otherwise imperfect world, and thus, strive to develop one's own morality from this basis of imperfection. This implies that rather than leading to the unsatisfying conclusion of Mouffe that those subjected to injustice must, for practical purposes, be burdened with presenting their experiences in a way that is palatable to the hegemonic, the hegemonic are burdened with approaching conflict with a kind of self-criticality and awareness that their reality may not be all encompassing. In other words, we must interact with members of society not as "reasonable" people, but approach them in light of *ren*, the way we might engage with members of family who, except in extreme cases, we will likely have to continue being family with whether we like them or not.

### *4.2.2 Confucian Incivility*

While Mouffe highlights the need to make conflict visible for establishing a stable yet flexible enough society for rearranging power, Sungmoon Kim (2014) shows how within Confucianism, acts of incivility are portrayed as necessary for maintaining relationships that make civility viable. The *Analects* depicts the story of a Duke who asks Confucius whether there is a saying that could ruin a state. When asked this question, Confucius replied, "a saying itself cannot have such effect, but there is a saying, 'I find little pleasure in ruling, save that no one will take exception to what I say.' If what one has to say is good (*shan*, 善) and no one takes exception, fine indeed. But if what one has to say is not good and no one takes exception, is this not close to a saying ruining a state?" (Analects 13:15 as cited in Kim, 2014 p.69). This assumes that no person or state can be morally flawless and suggests that without incivility against wrongness, a well-ordered, stable, and fair society would in fact, not be possible to maintain. I therefore want to argue that in order for the rights talk enabled

by PL to not encourage self-interested acts, while people may have a right to do something, in light of these Confucian observations, it is important to foster a kind of moral norm of civility that Kim (2014) describes to guide our exercise of rights within liberal societies. The ideal of incivility is used as a way to keep people (and institutions) accountable – through acts of incivility, a kind of "civil collective self-consciousness" can be developed (Kim, 2014 p.52).

What is the ideal of Confucian incivility that Kim (2014) describes? In exploring what "taking exception" against unjust deeds might mean within Confucianism, Kim (2014) focuses on the concept of *he* (和), often translated as harmony. Kim (2014) describes the concept of *he* as "a characteristically human social and political process of harmonization in which different and even conflicting views… are resolved not only by aesthetic ritualism but equally important by social and political communication, which sometimes involves tension and even, I argue, contestation especially in the democratic societal context" (p.61). *He* is discussed in contrast with *tong* (同) which refers to "the pathological proclivity to secure consensus (and collective identity) to the exclusion of the harmonizing social and political process" (Kim, 2014 p.61). *He* is also the character that is used for harmonies in music while *tong* is the character that is used to refer to agreement or sameness.

Unlike *tong*, achieving *he* requires reflexivity. Kim (2014) argues that *he* must not be seen as docility but rather, that "the real issue is whether or not the harmony between the self and the world is under one's ceaseless critical moral scrutiny and therefore whether or not the harmony between the self and the world is open to revision and further reformulation" (p.62-3). According to Kim's interpretation of the *Analects*, a critical component of maintaining civility through incivility is "reflexivity in the practice of *li* [or rituals] and of critical mind toward the existing social world" (Analects 4:18 as cited in Kim, 2014 p.63). Similarly, Chan (2002) interprets a passage on rites from the *Analects* as suggesting that "one should not blindly follow the rites as endorsed by society or the majority. Rather, one should adopt a reflective moral attitude to examine the ethical reason behind a rite and determine whether that rite is appropriate… and should change if the circumstance changes" (p.288). This critical attitude mirrors the attitude discussed in 4.2.1 that stems from recognizing the political as personal.

I agree with Kim and Chan that acts of incivility can be made conducive to cultivating morality and strengthening relationships by rooting it in moral reflexivity both about the society we find ourselves in as well as our own selves. When we deem a situation as something we must express incivility towards, as Kim (2014) suggests, incivility is not only

permissible but also required (p.64-5). Society can still deteriorate into a kind of docility and result in authoritarianism when harmonization is not met with the kind of reflexibility and consequent incivility that is described in the *Analects*. In order for civil society to be maintained, a reflexivity and criticality that can serve as a foundation for incivility in the face of wrongness must be cultivated.

Admittedly, excessive self-doubt can be paralyzing and the line between healthy reflexivity and constant uncertainty may be thin. However, as depicted in the discussion about *xiao* in section 4.1, developing the kind of reflexive incivility that is necessary for maintaining a harmonious relationship requires being able to determine when someone's fault is great enough to explicitly address and avoid deepening estrangement or creating obstacles. Finding the appropriate levels of reflexivity and incivility that is called for in specific contexts may require some level of trial and error and not be clearly laid out by any one doctrine. However, this discussion reinforces the importance of reassessing and recalibrating this balance and intentionally cultivating one's morality as members of a radically pluralistic society.

## 4.3 Maintaining Harmony through Reflexive and Critical Incivility

In the previous two chapters, I have argued while Mouffe's agonism is able to avoid PL's issue of cementing hegemonies and inciting antiestablishment sentiments, it does not detail how to engage in constant confrontation without creating estrangement that inhibits cooperation. Therefore, I want to show in the following that Confucian incivility can maintain harmonization across differences while giving power to take exception with wrong by legitimizing a form of remonstration that is not only outward looking but also reflexive.

### *4.3.1 Cultivating Morality*

The reason that Confucian theorists emphasize that morality should be cultivated is because "to be moral is characteristic of being human" (Huang, 2010 p.75). Mencius narrates that "the immoral person who 'hates death and yet take delight in being inhuman (*bu ren* 不仁) is like one who hates drunkenness and yet drinks excessively'" (Mencius as cited in Huang, 2010 p.77). Thus, developing one's morality can be seen as a human part of being a socially embedded self who is invested in continuing to be a part of some cooperative venture.

Emphasizing the development of morality also implies that recognizing everyone as free and equal political and social actors may be consistent with recognizing them as different in terms of moral cultivation and how much they embody *ren*. Historically, elders were

respected as moral exemplars since they had more experiences to reflect upon by virtue of the length of time they have lived and thus had more opportunities to cultivate their morality (Huang 2010, p.82; Bell & Metz, 2011 p.91). However, if radical and reasonable pluralism is taken as fact, this conclusion seems misplaced in modern day. Even if engaged in moral reflection, it is possible for someone who is 70 years old to never have experienced the kind of moral dilemma that a 7-year-old across the world finds themselves in.

In addition, there can be many obstacles to reassessment and recalibration. For instance, people who have been subject to systemic injustice and intergenerational trauma may have found safety in a kind of detachment and barring from moral sentiments. Or while there may be a desire to engage, engagement may be too painful or exceed one's emotional capacity in a world of overstimulation and constant information. People may also not have excess amounts of time to devote to constant moral reflection. Thus, rather than ascribing a group of people as morally elite, this recognition seems to call for the kind of humility that was assumed in the story of the Duke in section 4.2.2. It calls on people, particularly those in positions of power whose narratives have been systematically validated, to approach situations with the recognition that they do not and cannot ever fully understand the experiences of the people they are interacting with. This not only implies that we should overcome our defensive reflexes and engage with others' efforts to keep us accountable but also implies that we should show both ourselves and others grace as we continue to engage and develop morally. In other words, acts of incivility should ideally be met with humility and self-criticism, listening to learn and reflect rather than defend.

#### *4.3.2 Restoration*

By channeling disagreement through this kind of reflexive and humble incivility when there is conflict, Confucianism is often interpreted as a theory that focuses on restoration rather than retribution. Recognizing the social nature of actions and the interconnectedness of the impact of punitive measures, Bell and Metz (2011), for example, write that "Confucianism has long emphasized mediation over litigation as a way of dealing with social conflicts, on the grounds that mediation is more likely to restore harmonious relations" (p.85). Restoration is crucial for enabling the continuation of the cooperative venture while engaging in confrontation. Bell and Metz clarify that this focus on restoration in Confucianism does not extend to forgiving others for truly evil deeds (p.85). Nevertheless, this approach to conflict reflects the humility and reflexivity people are called to have when faced with disagreement. While punishment assumes that there is a clear understanding of who has wronged and what

"justice" would look like, restoration assumes that the context in which someone has been wronged is complex and that punitive measures are likely not going to result in a society that is subsequently free of this complexity nor cultivate the kind of morality that is necessary to reduce this wrongdoing.

Thus, rather than focusing on punitive measures, unjust actions are deterred within Confucianism by associating them with shame. To use an example to which I turn in more detail in the following chapter, if microaggressions are thought to be morally wrong, people should be ashamed of being microaggressive and work to not act in microaggressive ways. In fact, Confucian thinkers argue that we are only truly free when we are able to overcome conflicts, desires, or habits that are habituated or that we are internally struggling with and intuitively act morally such that we are rarely in situations where we should feel shame (Lee, 1996 p.371; Chan, 2002 p.299). Admittedly, what we should feel shame about, or in other words what is unethical, may be contested and in line the discussion on agonism, this conflict should not be hidden. Rather, as discussed, such conflict should be approached with humility and self-criticality such that restoration remains possible.

It may be important to clarify what shame is referring to here. Social worker Brene Brown (2013) draws the following distinction between guilt and shame: while guilt in light of wrongdoing evokes the response "I made a mistake," shame evokes the response "I am a mistake." Brown's research suggests that while guilt is a productive emotion in moral cultivation and restoration, shame often results in shutting down or becoming defensive (Brown, 2013). In light of this distinction, what Confucian scholars call shame would be more in line with what Brown refers to as guilt.

Lee (1996) hypothesizes that "[i]f Confucius were alive today in our rights-infatuated times, he would say, 'if people are guided by rights, they will have no sense of shame'" (p.374), implying that an overemphasis on rights can hinder our ability to achieve *he* and continue cooperating with radically pluralistic members of society. According to Lee, although rights may be necessary to defend one's dignity and self-esteem in adversarial circumstances and "protect a…moral space in which one can freely choose and act… talking in terms of rights may not be appropriate in some relationships" (p.375). Lee (1996) calls for finding a balance between rights and virtues since "a society without benevolence, friendship, and gratitude will be an unpleasant or an unlivable one; at the same time, a society that does not respect and protect the moral space of self-direction, self-government, and self-flourishing will be a demoralizing and intolerable one" (p.376).

## 4.4 Engaging in Agonistic Conflict with Confucian Incivility

While Mouffe's theory highlights the importance of making conflicts visible and thereby allowing hegemonies to be contested, Confucian ideals provide insight into how we can engage in confrontation without inhibiting the possibility of cooperation. In contrast to PL, making conflict visible strengthens the potential to establish a society that is stable and yet flexible enough for a rearrangement of power. Yet, in order for engaging in confrontation to promote the kind of cooperation that is necessary for society, people—including those in hegemonic positions—must approach incivility with reflexivity and criticality so that restoration is possible rather than approaching with vengeance. In fact, conflict, when guided by the above-described Confucian values, is not something that threatens the stability of society but rather makes cooperation possible by fostering harmonious relationships. In this way, Mouffe's agonism and Kim's interpretation of Confucian incivility can complement each other such that radically pluralistic individuals can peacefully coexist by engaging in conflict without cementing hegemonic practices, inciting antiestablishment sentiments, or resulting in estranged and uncooperative relationships.

# Chapter 5: Microaggressions

In the last chapter, I argued that for the kind of cooperative agonistic struggle that Mouffe proposes to be possible, incivility must be approached with reflexivity and humility to enable restoration of harmonious relationships. We can see the critiques of Mouffe and Confucianism return in the debates about the morality of microaggressions, which has been the subject of many reasonable yet radically pluralistic perspectives. In this final and brief chapter, I explore how Rawlsian liberalism may try to navigate this social-political conflict and what approaching with agonism guided by Confucian incivility may look like.

## 5.1 What are Microaggressions and What Disagreement Exists?

Microaggression is a term that was introduced to public discourse by psychologist Derald Wing Sue and colleagues, who defined microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue as cited in Rini, 2018 p.334). Rini argues that the injustice of microaggressive actions is not necessarily embedded in the words or act itself, but its context in an "oppressive pattern of similar insults" that mirror historical hegemonic systems (p.332). An example of microaggressions would be someone making random noises that they thought sounded vaguely Asian to a Korean speaker to see if they said anything in Korean, then defending themselves after being told that it was inappropriate until finally agreeing to stop since it made the aggrieved "feel uncomfortable."

Whether microaggressions really exist and how one should respond to them has been the subject of numerous deeply opposed yet well-developed interpretations. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is a prominent academic writer that opposes legitimizing microaggressions out of concern that it is feeding into a harmful victimhood culture. Haidt borrows from the writings of Campbell and Manning (2014) to argue that the structural logic of moral dependence and partisanship for acting on microaggressive acts leads to the emergence of a victimhood culture where the aggrieved "'display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance'" (Campbell and Manning as cited in Haidt, 2015). Haidt (2015) claims that this tendency to frame oneself as a victim is harmful because it "rewards people for taking on a personal identity as one who is damaged, weak, and aggrieved… [It] fosters 'moral dependence' and an atrophying of the ability to handle small

interpersonal matters on one's own" (para.4) As individuals lose interpersonal skills "it creates a society of constant and intense moral conflict as people compete for status as victims or as defenders of victims" (Campbell and Manning as cited in Haidt, 2015).

Haidt (2015) argues that this emerging culture of competitive victimhood spans the political spectrum. Not only are left-wing students at colleges incentivized to publicize their grievances and emphasize their victimization, "the response of those labeled as oppressors is frequently to 'assert that they are a victim as well'" (Haidt, 2015 para.7 in The Evolution of Moral Culture). Thus, "men criticized as sexist for challenging radical feminism defend themselves as victims of reverse sexism, [and] people criticized as being unsympathetic proclaim their own history of victimization" (Campbell and Manning as cited in Haidt, 2015). Haidt (2015) points to this culture of victimization as not only weakening people's interpersonal skills and incentivizing the status of being a victim but also as driving polarization. Admittedly, the situation described by Haidt where everyone claims they are being harmed is all too familiar with the rise of menist movements and insurrections by people who claim that the 2020 US election was fraudulent. Thus, Haidt seems to ultimate propose that people must "grow a thicker skin" against such slights rather than claim the status of victim.

In contrast, philosopher Regina Rini (2018) argues that this kind of "grow a thicker skin" argument that the aggrieved face when they try to address the injustice of microaggressions fails to properly account for the systemic context that microaggressive acts are situated in. As reflected in feminist theory or critical race theory, the issue is not the exact words that were said at one event on one day by one bad person but rather, the oppressive power structure that normalizes acts that make people question their worth, belonging, and identity. In addition, arguments that people need to just "grow a thicker skin" gaslights people who have made themselves vulnerable and taken the risk of calling out unjust acts. It delegitimizes the anger and hurt people feel as a result of oppressive systems, equating them to being hateful or fraudulent.

McKinnon (2017) observes that such responses mirror common tropes of epistemic injustice (discussed in chapter 3) where people in positions of power discredit a speaker's testimony by appealing to their subjective positioning and emotionality and/or the good intentions or character of the perpetrator (p.168). While such gaslighting responses may question the credibility of the knower, McKinnon argues that in cases of injustice such as microaggressions, we actually have strong epistemic and moral reasons to believe the aggrieved since the positioning of the aggrieved may in fact be necessary to "*perceive*

harassment as harassment," which obligates allies to "put their own perceptions aside and *trust* the testimony of the marginalized person" (p.171).

As shown, while Haidt and Rini hold deeply opposing stances on what microaggressions are and what responses are appropriate, they also both provide well-developed argumentation for their perspectives that many have found convincing. In this way, it may be said that reasonably pluralistic perspectives exist for how acts that are accused of being microaggressive should be addressed and handled.

## 5.2 The Limitations of Approaching with Political Liberalism

How would Rawlsian political liberalism accommodate for this kind of disagreement over a matter of justice and power? As a doctrine that revolves around respecting those who hold opposing views as long as they genuinely uphold agreed upon principles such as liberty and equality in the political realm, PL would require respecting people who commit microaggressive acts in the non-political realm. Mouffe's critiques discussed in chapter 3 helps illuminate how this would make it increasingly difficult to rearrange power by hiding the hegemony while putting the validity of the nonhegemonic at the mercy of being tolerated by dominant views.

As seen in the example above about Korean, perpetrators would be enabled to position themselves as "kind" or "generous" for stopping their actions because it makes the aggrieved "uncomfortable," without admitting the wrongness of the act they committed by dictating the terms of reasonability and excluding the testimony of the aggrieved as overly sensitive. In other words, as Mouffe theorized, the complaints of the aggrieved can be excluded by labeling it unreasonable under a veil of neutrality, making the act of exclusion incontestable.

Meanwhile, as discussed in 3.2.3, the aggrieved would be burdened with explaining why the action was harmful in terms that the hegemonic group finds reasonable despite the fact that no shared language may exist, all the while being framed as overly sensitive and having their capacity as a knower questioned. When PL is applied, the aggrieved's reaction is framed as, at best, not understandable, and at worst, irrational. Meanwhile, the perpetrator is framed as virtuous for discontinuing their unjust acts at the recognition of the other's discomfort, despite a lack of recognition of the deeper issue underyling what they have said or done. In such cases, the burden that is placed on the aggrieved is not even acknowledged and there is no possibility of rearranging existing power relations.

This limitation of PL that Mouffe's critique highlights can be observed in the language that Haidt uses to describe microaggressions. Haidt's description of how people are labeling themselves as victims because they can benefit socially from victimhood relies on the assumption that people are reacting oversensitively to minor slights and overlooking the kind of knowledge that may be necessary to pick up on the harmfulness of microaggressions. In addition, Haidt's narrative also presumes than the victimhood is merely an act, rather than taking seriously the concern that toxic, humiliating, and traumatizing acts have been normalized in our society. It questions the epistemic credibility of the testifier and fails to recognize how those who take issue with microaggressions are not taking issue with the fact that the words that were said were rude or insensitive. Rather, they are taking issue with the systems they represent and the ideologies that has made saying these things possible.

Despite these issues, if PL is applied, Haidt's view would be difficult to contest. Given the plurality of thoughts on microaggressions, the challenges by the aggrieved to create systemic change could be conceptualized as disrespectful and unwarranted so long as the perpetrators were professedly supporting constitutional equality. No institutional action could be justified until an overlapping consensus on harm is reached by people that the hegemonic deems reasonable, which generally requires harm to become undeniably visible, even to those who lack the experiences necessary to be in tune with the harm. In this way, hegemonies would be cemented and, in the meanwhile, claims of a right to insult would be honored. Haidt's discussion demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the fundamental issue with microaggressions and dangerously blurs holding people accountable with oversensitivity. Since the reasonability of those who can (arguably) best perceive microaggressions as microaggressions are questioned, their interpretations are depoliticized and they are called on to be respectful of the ideologies that have harmed them for the sake of political order. In this way, the narrative of a "culture of victimhood" overlooks a dimension of power, thereby justifying actions that perpetuate hegemonies.

## 5.3 Applying an Agonistic Approach to Conflict Guided by Confucian Incivility

This is where the theories developed by Mouffe and Confucianists can be used to capture the dimension of power and promote possibly cooperative relationships. While a liberal approach towards the conflict about microaggressions would cement hegemonies and overlook the misplaced burden of proof, an agonistic social reality admits that the rational cannot guide us to a consensus since the existing views are incommensurable. Rather,

applying an agonistic approach would acknowledge the political dimension of the disagreement and propose making conflict visible.

What would making conflict visible look like? At the risk of being oversimplistic, I try to illustrate a picture below. Assuming that there exists adequate representation for people holding different perspectives, according to agonistic theory, people must engage in the political fight to make their views hegemonic (Mouffe, 2016). Importantly, no one's interpretation would be prepolitically ruled out. Within the context of microaggressions, this may involve writing about why or why not microaggressions exist or how they must be addressed. It may also involve creating an archive of microaggressive acts people have had to navigate or a response to such lists then debating about whether this is appropriate. In doing so, a view may become the dominant narrative of this issue.

Unchecked, however, this may devolve into the phenomenon that Mary Ann Glendon (1991) calls American Rights Talk. She describes the American rights dialect as absolute and excessive, evading dialogues about responsibility and laser focusing on the lone rights bearer that "promote mere assertion over reason-giving" (p.14). Glendon (1991) notes that the language of rights within American society is no longer about the protection of equality and freedom but about the "legitimation of individual and group egoism" (p.172). This phenomenon may be a more apt description of the existing polarization that is able to encompass a dimension of power compared to what Haidt calls a culture of victimhood. Thus, this engagement with confrontation should be mediated by Confucian incivility. In fact, rather than attacking the idea of rights itself, Glendon (1991) calls for a "reevaluation of certain thoughtless, habitual ways of thinking and speaking about rights" (p.14-15), like Confucian ideas of constant reflexivity and criticality.

How can this kind of "fight" be informed by Confucian incivility that focuses on maintaining harmony by rooting itself in a relationality of ren? Since the personal is acknowledged as political, there would be no dismissal of the deep intensity with which people bring forth their arguments. Rather than focusing on one's right to do something, by guiding one's arguments with Confucian incivility, there can be greater emphasis placed on being decent, reflective, and self-critical about one's own approach. One can approach with the realization that no one is morally elite and feel shame (or to use Brown's language, guilt) in realization of wrongdoing, enabling people to listen to learn rather than defend. In other words, when people are met with counterarguments, they are compelled to be critical about themselves and their society, particularly if they are in positions of power such that their realities have been rarely questioned.

Rini (2018) examines whether it is always appropriate and ideal to respond with righteous anger against microaggressive acts and concludes that while anger shows a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, it "moves too quickly from the correct observation that microagressions involve disrespectful harm to the conclusion that anger is the right response. In some cases, anger may not serve the interests of microaggression victims, even if it is otherwise justified." (p.338). Confucian ideals of incivility and its emphasis on restoration rather than retribution support Rini's discussion. While possibly unintuitive and perhaps experientially unfair, it calls on everyone—the aggrieved as well as the perpetrators—to see others as deeply human. This does not imply that perpetrators must be forgiven, but rather, defends that they are seen fully instead of being demonized or reduced to their harmful action, thereby allowing for greater possibility of the restoration of a harmonious and possibly cooperative relationship. While it avoids signaling that anything people do is okay as long as they uphold political principles of liberty and equality, it also avoids morally attacking people and fostering antiestablishment sentiments.

## 5.4 Dealing with Microaggressions

In this chapter, I applied the theoretical discussion presented in chapter 2-4 to the case of microaggressions. As a subject of radically pluralistic interpretations, I show how a politically liberal approach would enable interpretations like the one presented by Haidt to become dominant, framing the aggrieved as overly sensitive and making the view incontestable. I demonstrate how Mouffe's agonistic approach can help avoid these pitfalls by making conflict visible, however, illustrate how unmediated conflict can be detrimental to the possibility of cooperation by creating estrangement between those who disagree. Thus, I present approaching conflict with Confucian incivility so that disagreement can become something that helps maintain and restore harmonious relationships.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined Rawls' politically liberal approach to establishing a stable, well-ordered, and fair society among radically pluralistic people and critical responses to his theory that stemmed from two vastly different traditions: Mouffe's agonism and Kim's Confucian incivility. First, I analyzed the motivation behind PL and Nussbaum's interpretation of how it can handle disagreement about issues of justice. Borrowing from Mouffe's agonistic theory, I argued that PL overlooks a dimension of power and thus, legitimizes perpetuating hegemonic systems by acting in exclusionary ways under a veil of neutrality while inciting antiestablishment sentiments by removing serious political channels for voicing one's concerns.

In order to address these limitations of PL, I defended the idea that conflict must not only be made visible but also that people must engage in incivility for civility to be viable. By making conflict visible, rearranging power becomes possible and since people are able to act against wrongness, relationships are not estranged. Mouffe's discussion of agonistic conflict lacked an explanation of how cooperation can be maintained despite constant confrontation, and thus, I turned to Confucianism that focuses on restoration of harmonious relationships. I employed Sungmoon Kim's description of Confucian incivility to illustrate how awareness of the interconnected of society and a mindset of critical reflexivity enables the continuation of cooperation through confrontation. In this way, I showed that Mouffe and Confucianism, despite being from vastly different traditions, can complement each other in enabling peaceful coexistence between people who hold deeply opposing beliefs and values.

In the final chapter, I explored how the importance of Mouffe and Confucian ideas returned in the case of pluralistic disagreement about the morality of microaggressions. While PL was limited in its ability to allow for the hegemony to be challenged, taking Mouffe's approach helped address this issue. However, Mouffe's agonistic conflict was also shown to be vulnerable to fallout that makes cooperation increasingly difficult. Thus, I demonstrated how engaging in continued confrontation with Confucian incivility could avoid creating estrangement. Ultimately, I concluded that in order for people with deeply opposing values and beliefs to be able to continue on the cooperative venture of society, wrong must not be overlooked, conflict must be made visible, and people must approach disagreement with the kind of reflexivity and criticality described by Confucian incivility.

When I was 6, my family immigrated to the US, home to the conflict described in this thesis. Often, microaggressions that I experienced and attempted to name were met with replies such as “that’s just the way things are” or “life is unfair.” We were expected to excel in the unfairness so that the American Dream painted in our minds could also become our reality. In his account of systematic racism in American society, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) describes the American Dream and the image of “perfect houses with nice laws… Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways” as a gorgeous dream that is not only inaccessible for many but depends on (a) bodies that are quelled and (b) the naïve belief that it is the just result of “grit, honor, and good works” (p.11, 98). When one wakes up from this gorgeous dream and realizes that the dream rests on the backs of millions—realizes that the dream rests on “bedding made from our bodies,” namely the bodies of those who have been exploited and oppressed—the liberal tenet of tolerance can only feel suffocating. Living in fear and being constantly dehumanized should not be a price people have to pay to live in a “free” country. In contrast to the culture that PL breeds, people’s ability to exist at ease should not depend on whether they are tolerated by people who hold power.

In order for establishing a stable, well-ordered, and fair society among radically pluralistic individuals to be viable, as Confucianists describe, we must take exception with moral wrongs and as Mouffe advocates for, conflict about issues of justice must be made visible. And as we continue engaging in confrontation, we must allow for possibly cooperative relationships to be maintained by approaching disagreement with a kind of incivility qualified with Confucian norms described by Kim.

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