

# Evocative representation

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This article is motivated by one central question: when do we say that representation has been achieved well, and how can we be wrong? In asking this question I am interested in finding the norm internal to political representation. My assumption is that the norm of representation is discernible through how we speak about representation, and indeed how we speak when we represent. In other words, I propose a foundationalist norm. The argument will first spell out what is meant by a norm and then present a constructivist account of representation that a foundationalist normative approach must address. I then argue, using Cora Diamond's writings on ethics and Viveiros de Castro's ontology, that the norm of representation is tied to articulating someone's life, to evoking them, or more precisely to making it absolutely transparent that someone *has a life*.<sup>1</sup> My argument is that representing well is fundamentally tied to engaging the moral imagination in the sympathetic exercise of understanding another embodied perspective. I spend some time expanding on this, what I call evocative representation. I show how a foundationalist account of when we say that representation has been achieved well gives us grounds for judging the merits of any particular representation. Although what is normative of representation gives grounds for judging well accomplished representative processes, it does not insulate us against misrepresentation; indeed, misrepresenting is a possibility internal to representation; a failure of the moral imagination being written into its very nature.

## 1 | WHAT IS A NORM?

Theories of political representation are naturally interested in what is normative of the activity of representing. However, detailed accounts of what exactly constitutes a norm are few and far between. Usually, theorists of political representation proceed on the assumption that a norm is what ought to be the case, and therefore sneak into what is normative of representative activity criteria that rightfully belong to other activities, such as democratic practice. Even in cases where democratic norms are not taken for what is normative of representing (for example, Rehfeld, 2006),<sup>2</sup> there is little engagement with the specificity of representation in normative terms. Generally, what is normative of a representative activity tends to be taken as expressible in a set of criteria, themselves deducible from different types of representation (see Mansbridge, 2003).<sup>3</sup> This way of treating the issue of normativity is neither the only, nor necessarily the most fruitful, one. What is normative of an activity is not necessarily synonymous with a set of criteria that directs the activity in question. I now turn to elaborating on this point.

In Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* there is a particularly useful treatment of normativity. What I am interested in here are Cavell's arguments that normativity is neither opposed to descriptive statements nor is the same as prescriptive ones. He starts by thinking about actions, because it is there that appeals to a norm have their bite. In other words, norms can be thought of as the internal structure of right action and are therefore always tied to doing something or other. What is characteristic about actions, he says, "is that they can—in various specific ways—go wrong" (Cavell, 1969/2002, p. 22). So whenever I perform an action someone can point out ways in which my action has failed. In case I am myself practiced in certain actions—say, actions specific to the game of tennis—I can also know that I have performed badly, as well as what I should have done, perhaps if I had been more careful, focused, and so on. This kind of discord between doing and doing well is internal to actions, and in Cavell's argument the list of such actions includes "describing, calculating, promising, plotting, warning, asserting, defining". The list is left open (it could certainly include "representing"), but the point of it is this: performing any of the actions typical of human interaction can only have the possibility of going wrong as internal to action itself inasmuch as there are ways of performing specific actions that are correct.<sup>4</sup> In other words, successfully performing actions "depends upon our adopting and following the ways in which the action in question is done, upon what is normative for it".

For Cavell, then, a norm is the correct way of performing an action, of doing. If for example, we understand describing itself as an action, then there are also "ways normative for describing" — correct ways of describing, of describing well. The salient point for the present discussion is that these are given in and by language: I cannot go about describing a situation in any way I please, but must follow what is normative for descriptive statements, in order for my utterances to count as descriptions at all, let alone as good ones. This line of argumentation has its roots in a Wittgensteinian understanding of language as symbiotic with practices. Under this reading, it is impossible to privilege either behavior or utterance: the two are together formative of the corporality of a language. Importantly, this means that the ensemble of actions and statements that is a language has norms that define its correct functioning, though these are most of the time implicit. So the ways normative of describing are internal to describing itself. And it is by paying attention to descriptions—and extrapolating them from their immediate context—that we can speak about such things as the norms for describing.

To make this point, Cavell introduces the distinction between normative and prescriptive statements. It is commonplace to identify what we mean by normative with the use of "ought." So if I am in a situation where I am wavering between several courses of action, a friend might tell me: you really ought to do x. This use of ought, in Cavell's analysis, does not amount to a normative statement, but to a prescriptive one. This is so because prescribing presupposes the existence of viable options, whereas *norms are not elective*. So I cannot be recommended to do x out of the blue, without y also being an option. To paraphrase one of Cavell's examples, I cannot be told that I ought to repay a debt unless I am in fact considering other courses of action. In normal circumstances, where the repayment of the debt is the *only* course of action, telling me I ought to repay is close to meaningless. So a prescriptive statement, which is often expressed as an ought, has sense inasmuch as it signals to the doer what the correct action is. However, this does not amount to establishing a norm, because this operation of prescription itself presupposes a norm. "Telling us what we ought to do may involve *appeal* to a pre-existent rule or standard, but it cannot constitute the establishment of that rule or standard" (p. 22). What correct action is—the norm—must pre-exist any prescription.

A norm in this account starts to resemble a descriptive statement. Indeed, to be guided by a norm is to have a description of correct action as a yardstick for actual action. It is in this sense that a prescription can appeal to a norm but cannot itself constitute it. 'You ought to pay your debt' doesn't tell me what is normative of debt relations, but simply that in the given situation it would be better for me to respect the normativity of debts, always inasmuch as not doing so is an actual option. Similarly, when I teach someone how to serve a tennis ball, I am showing them what is normative of this action by describing, or showing, or both, what serving a tennis ball is. If I then say: you must swing your arm higher, I am simply reminding them that doing the action correctly involves swinging your arm at a certain height. Confusion as to this point might arise from the fact that we could use ought as a normative instruction as well. We might say to a novice—"you ought to move your arm like this." However, what Cavell reminds us is that this is a dubious

use of ought, because someone that does not yet know the norm—that is, how an action is done—cannot meaningfully be given a choice, which ought necessarily implies.

Wittgenstein's later work is replete with experiments that can be read as pointing towards this foundationalist understanding of norms. Though Wittgenstein himself is not directly concerned with normativity, his concept of grammar (Hacker, 2012; Wittgenstein, 1970, 1980, 1953/2001) can be read as similar to—and offering a foundation for—the concept of norm as developed by Cavell. Part of the confusion between prescriptive and normative statements can be traced to the tendency to equate both kinds of statements with imperatives. But as Cavell argues, imperatives are a special case of a prescription, and doubtful as paradigmatic cases of norms. In this connection, he discusses Kant's categorical imperative: to act in accordance with the moral law is to act in a way that you would will to be as a universal norm. But according to the Wittgensteinian reading of Cavell, this is not particularly imperative. Instead, the force of Kant's categorical comes from it being *declarative*, that is, telling us what it is to be moral at all. "The Categorical Declarative does not tell you what you *ought* to do if you want to be moral; it tells you (part of) what you in fact do when you *are* moral" (p. 25). In this view then, a norm is neither identical to a prescriptive statement (though surely related to one), nor opposed to descriptive ones. So when speaking of the norm of political representation, I am not trying to understand what people ought to do to represent well, but rather what they already do when they represent well. In other words, I am looking for that which already informs what it is to act in a way that can be called good representation.

I argued in the beginning of this section that contemporary treatments of political representation are quite comfortable working without explicit formulations of what norms are. With this discussion in the background, I want to now turn to some contemporary treatments of representation and tease out what they implicitly suggest is normative of this activity. I pay particular attention to constructivist accounts, for two reasons. First, they are arguably the most influential accounts of representation today. Second, a foundationalist approach must necessarily engage with constructivist ones, which are squeamish about accepting any solid background.

## 2 | CONSTRUCTIVIST NORMATIVITY

Just as the norms of describing are internal to describing itself—are part of the language games of descriptions—so are the norms of representing. Inasmuch as we think of political representation as an action and process (Saward, 2006), it follows from the previous line of reasoning that it is guided by internal norms of correct functioning. Despite the general tendency of the literature to look upon representation as a process, what has been termed the constructivist turn in political representation has had a hard time of identifying norms internal to the process of representation. In other words, the constructed nature of the representative process has left little room for grounding what might count as good representation.

To illustrate the difficulty that the literature has so far encountered in defining representation's norms, I discuss several ways of characterizing representation, each with its own view of what is normative for this activity. I begin with Saward's representative claims and their elaboration in the shape-shifting representative. I then look at the idea of responsiveness as the yardstick of normativity and at Lisa Disch's mobilization conception of political representation. Lastly, I discuss Disch's (2015) later contribution to what she calls the constructivist turn. There, she asks whether epistemological commitments to constructivism are incompatible with political commitments to democracy; a question that can be interpreted in light of this discussion as a search for the relation between epistemological constructivism and normative foundationalism. After discussing these contributions in turn, I argue that there is another way to see the norm of political representation; namely, through when and why we tend to take representative claims as correct, and when and why we tend to take them as wrong. We can then advance a foundational norm, discovered, as it were, in the operations of representation itself, which is what I call evocative representation.

The claim-making framework in representation theory championed by Michael Saward (2006) has successfully realigned theoretical interest in representation with linguistic and processual considerations. Instead of focusing on the various forms of political representation—something that theorists had been doing for a long time, and in a

sense had taken for granted as a dominant mode of theoretical inquiry—Saward proposed we think of the process of representation as akin to the process of presenting a claim. In subsequent elaborations of this basic idea, Saward (see 2014) argues that it is not the forms of representation that define its activity, but rather the general outlines of claim presentation. In fact, representatives are shape-shifters, meaning that they are free to change representative forms in order to fit the various circumstances of representing. This theatrical focus counters the tendency of “contemporary normative frames [to] stress singular and consistent roles of political actors or leaders” (2014, p. 724). Said differently, the repertoire of representation is wider than “normative prejudgment” (p. 725) would allow, and therefore stretches through and beyond the classical roles of trustee, delegate, and so on. In the terminology advanced through Cavell’s discussion, saying that representatives ought to act as trustees or delegates is prescriptive, not normative. It would be normative to say that when representatives do act as representatives, they do in fact act as trustees, delegates, and so on. Saward’s insight is that when representatives act as representatives they do in fact act through many different roles. In other words, what it is to represent, and what it is to represent well, cannot be given in one form over all others. Their simultaneous availability takes us some way toward what is normative for representation by recognizing its inherent multiplicity.

Saward’s account of representation as being centered on the presentation and contestation of claims unsettles two important aspects of how political representation had previously been theorized: it devalues the primacy of formal representative types, while asking what the point of representation is. A representative, in Saward’s view, is free to shape-shift as she sees fit, or according to the relevant situation, and in doing so she creates a persona for herself that is able to carry the representative work without identifying with a particular role. In other words—and this is the constructivist foundation of his account—the representative claim is first and foremost a contingent relation between parties, and its primary function is to bring these parties into being (the represented as well as the representative), and not just to convey interests and preferences from one being to another. The representative relation is therefore engaged in the creation of subject-positions (Saward, 2014; also see Tănăsescu, 2019 for a further elaboration of this concept).

This idea—that constituency interests are secondary to subject creation—is further developed by Lisa Disch (2012b) in terms of constitutive effects, and elsewhere in terms of a “mobilization conception of representation” (2011). She argues that representation “neither simply reflects nor transmits demands; it creates them as it actively recruits constituencies.” This makes it clear that preferences and interests are products of the representative activity or ways of speaking about representation that are in a sense derivative. Disch’s (2011) mobilization conception of representation works with the same constructivist assumptions as Saward’s, and presents a picture of representative acts as being primarily about the solidification of identities around the making and unmaking of claims. This way of thinking about representation offers no bedrock that we can use to judge whether representation is done well or not. For example, the idea of weighing representation in terms of the responsiveness of the representative to the represented (see Celis, 2012) cannot be held consistently with the idea that the subjects of representation and their interests are constituted through the representative claim. Indeed, Disch rejects the intelligibility of responsiveness and instead proposes reflexivity as “the normative standard for evaluating political representation” (Disch, 2011, p. 111). She characterizes this as a systemic quality that ensures that representation “can be judged as more or less democratic insofar as it does more or less to mobilize both express and implicit objections from the represented”. This would mean that, insofar as a system is open enough to allow for contestation of, and debate around, representative claims, then we can, on light normative grounds, call it, at least, democratic. This kind of conclusion is forced upon constructivist accounts of representation because of their inherent commitment to foundationless norms, but it does not quite suffice. After all, contemporary politics is increasingly populated with regimes that feign all the formal signs of representation, including reflexivity and open contestation, without also being, on account of that, either democratic or representative.

Recalling the earlier discussion of normativity, I suggest that reflexivity is not particularly normative. In other words, when someone asks whether a claim is representative, pointing to the openness of the system that produced the claim cannot provide an answer. It can provide some measure of legitimation, but there is no assurance that a representative claim will be a good one simply because it is more or less democratic. The fact of participation as such does not have

any kind of necessary relation to the quality of representative claims. So, although Disch offers a very helpful conceptualization of what the activity of representation consists of, that conceptualization is not enough to tell us what it is to represent *well*. Or rather, recalling the relation between norms and descriptions, what it is to represent well is buried in her account and not given its proper due.

Saward's account seems to remain agnostic as to representation's norm. The conceptualization that he offers of the activity of representation forces him to say that a claim is representative if it is accepted as such by a relevant audience. This is, in one sense, right—acceptance by the represented surely must weigh heavily on whether a claim is in fact representative. What is left out, and what points toward the need for further elaboration in this area, is the difference between being and feeling represented. Cavell pointed out that what is characteristic of actions is the possibility of their going astray. In the action of representing, what would it mean to both have audience acceptance *and* go astray? In other words, what would it be to feel represented, without being so?

The constructivist turn in representation theory has been very successful in showing that both the represented and the representative are constituted through the process of representation. Commenting on Derrida, Disch (2011) shows that representation had previously fallen prey to the myth of primordial presence; namely, the idea that the subjectivities involved in a representative process are ontologically primary. The subject-positions that arise from the representative process are not pure ontological givens. However, they are also not free to be whatever they wish. In other words, though representation, in advancing claims, creates constituencies and representatives, it cannot do so contingently; the representative cannot say *anything* and have it count as representative, or have it engender constituencies. What can be missed by focusing on the constructed nature of the representative relation is that the judgments that we do make about representative claims rely on foundational norms that are embedded in the ways in which we speak when representing. The constitution of subject-positions is bound by the grammar of the language in which they are articulated.

The importance of analyzing the act of speaking in order to analyze the process of representation has been amply recognized. In another contribution, Disch (2012a) discusses the importance of speaking and naming in political representation by building on a productive tension between Pitkin and Laclau. Disch (2011, 2012a) argues that Laclau offers a concept of representation that is itself ontologically primary, and therefore develops a representation genuinely free from the dominance of interests, whereas Pitkin remains wedded to a supposed ontological primacy of interests themselves. For Laclau, representation is done in the act of naming a people. Under this account, the norm of representation-as-naming is what the act makes possible. The act is well done when it allows for the constitution of a people that does not kill difference in the name of its own unity, but rather incorporates it. So representation is well done when a people is created through the process of naming that is at the same time unitary and heterogenous. But this norm is not internal to the act of speaking itself: there is nothing that the representative can say that will ensure the survival of heterogeneity. In fact, the norm here is heterogeneity despite unity, which (like reflexivity before it) seems to be a democratic prescription (and therefore an external principle) rather than a description of what we do when we speak well as representatives.

To sum up: thinking of representation as a process through which subject-positions are created and interact reveals the primacy of speaking in understanding what goes on when some are represented by others. But by the same token we are no longer able to specify what is normative of representation and are forced, instead, to prescribe democratic rules of functioning.<sup>5</sup> The constructivist turn in representation theory has argued convincingly that political representation is primarily about relations, and that the relations between subjectivities that it inaugurates are at the same time the inauguration of subjectivities themselves. It is salutary to be freed from the primacy of interests and the myth of presence, but there is also something intrinsic to being a subject that is not adequately taken into account by constructivists. We do not speak of subjects and objects in the same way—objectifying is, after all, a grave insult to the subject—and this is so because in subjectifying we are also engaging an intrinsic norm that separates subjects from everything else. Indeed, subjectifying previously objectified entities is a staple of progressive representation. Constructivism is right to insist that many previously discarded beings can be subjects (see Tănăsescu, 2015, 2019), but in speaking about something as a subject and being recognized as speaking well, we are bound to discover what is normative of

representative claims. I propose therefore we think about what is normative of representation in foundationalist terms, because we can then both uphold the epistemological primacy of representative claims and say something about its internal, ontologically grounded, norms. I now briefly turn to a way of discussing the act of speaking that can give us useful conceptual tools for identifying the internal norms of representative speech.

### 3 | SPEAKING AND SPEAKING WELL

In Tănăsescu (2019) I developed an argument, based on J. L. Austin's (1975) theory of language and Judith Butler's use of it in social theory, to demonstrate that a representative claim is best thought of as an illocutionary speech act disguised as a constative. In short, the argument is that representative speech is most productively understood as inaugurating subjects (therefore as illocutionary, bringing something into being), though its very form of presentation is constative, that is to say, it claims to have *discovered* that which it creates. "I now pronounce you husband and wife" is an illocutionary, because it is the utterance itself that brings the state of affairs—marriage—into being. On the other hand, "the desk is wet" is a constative, because whether this utterance is happy or unhappy, to use Austin's terms, is not dependent on what it brings about, but is amenable to factual checking: the utterance is happy if indeed the desk is wet.

Because the illocutionary *act* is not tied to truth claims in the same way as the constative, its happiness depends on a whole array of contextual factors that must work together. As Judith Butler (1997) demonstrates, social realities and relations are constantly negotiated through the performative use of language that is instrumental to their genesis. A whole cultural apparatus is involved in the maintenance of particular kinds of social relations, and this can work in all directions. In other words, there is a whole culture of hate that gives hate speech its capacity to hurt its victims literally, as much as there is a culture of empathy that inaugurates expansive subjects.

Understanding representative claims as illocutionaries disguised as constatives allows for a more fine-grained interrogation of the operations of subject formation involved in representation and their relation to what is normative of this activity. Claiming to represent, whether human or non-human subjects, always involves the inauguration of subjectivities that have the general outlines specified by the claim itself. For example, if animal representatives speak of golden jackals as providing ecosystem services in the form of carrion disposal, this inaugurates the subject-position "golden jackal" (as much as the subject position "jackal representative") such that it appears that carrion disposal is part and parcel of being a jackal. The illocutionary *act* claim, in other words, appears to be a discovery of a latent feature of jackal sensibility, and therefore the constructivist operations discussed earlier are successfully effaced.

The effacement involved in representative speech works both to mystify the process, and to give force to the illocutionary. The weight of empirical discovery is transmitted to what is essentially a process of invention. But, as with representative claims earlier, not every claim is equally amenable to credible presentation. One could also claim that the jackal is a thief, and therefore inaugurate a particular set of subject-positions implying particular kinds of relations, but one could not as credibly claim the jackal as a subject concerned with global climate change. The success of the transition from illocutionary to constative is in part given by the cultural resources available to give life to the created or discovered subject. The ideas of ecosystem services and the cultural imagination of jackal mischievousness give vital resources to achieve the happiness of illocutionary summoning into being. Thinking the jackal as concerned with global climate change is not as credible because we currently lack the adjacent cultural resources that would give it specific weight. This, however, is always amenable to change.

There is an internal relation between the illocutionary and the constative as used here that can be described by the play between the cultural and natural affordances surrounding a representative claim. Representative speech can only be thought of as sliding between illocutionary creation and constative discovery inasmuch as there are a number of symbols, practices, and cultural truths that conspire to make subjects seem given. Similarly, a particular subjective configuration is intrinsically related to the natural affordances (Descola, 2014) that limit, to some extent, what can be said. One cannot claim anything at all, but one can always claim more than currently possible. Another way of

expressing this skewed relation is to say that representative claims function in the ways described here inasmuch as they rely on a common capacity among the subjects actively participating in representative processes to fashion subjectivities. This process of creation is intrinsically related to what is called the moral, or sympathetic, imagination, to which I will shortly turn.

To sum up: the representative claim can be understood as an illocutionary disguised as a constative. Representative claims are illocutionary claims that are happy or unhappy depending on whether or not they achieve their desired effect—bringing into existence certain subject-positions. Within this operation, there are norms, understood in the Cavellian way already discussed, that make a claim count as a good one. A good representative claim would then be one that successfully brings into existence the intended subject-positions. However, bringing subjects into being—what I call evoking them—is an operation that, in virtue of the working of language and the concept of subject itself, relies on the moral imagination of both the representative and the represented. It is through the moral imagination that the natural affordances of the world come into play with cultural affordances such that new subjects can evolve. I now turn to completing the argument by spelling out the ways in which evocative representation is tied to the moral imagination, and what this means for representing well.

#### 4 | EVOKING SUBJECTS

In order to speak of the norm internal to the action of representing, I have to give an account of why we tend to take the naming of some subjects as good, while others as bad, manipulative, and so on. I think the best way to do this is by thinking of representation as the inauguration of subjects outside the strictly political realm. In literature, for example, subjects are routinely inaugurated, and there we may find some clues as to why we think a subject has been formed well, or not. A brief detour through literature can help us tease out the role of the moral imagination in the evocation of subjects. Subject-positions in the political realm are summoned into being just as characters in a novel, each approaching, but never quite coinciding, with the physicality of a body. As Cora Diamond puts it:

*through novels and stories, we are able to see how our pursuit of private ends may conflict with what we owe others; we come, through such literature, to care about the sufferings or the humiliation of a wider range of human beings. (Diamond, 1991, p. 49)*

We come to see more subjects.

In discussing Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Diamond describes two different attitudes that are fundamental in setting the way in which Scrooge engages with the world. One attitude is that of rational calculation, where it is the interests of others that should compel us to act toward them in a certain, moral way. Presenting someone with a list of another's interests, the reasoning goes, should suffice to compel them to change their behavior, to help, to care.<sup>6</sup> However, Scrooge is unmoved and finds "it fitting that those in Want go to the workhouse, and, if they would rather die, they had better do so." Though presenting reasons for action is supposed to elicit a moral response, it also leaves open the possibility of justifying not caring, of being unmoved. This has parallels with the European refugee crisis that has been unfolding over the last decade. People from war-torn regions of the world, people with many interests and preferences, are nonetheless left to drift in literal or, if intercepted, legal, limbo, so as not to encourage more risk-takers to join, were Europeans to have an overwhelmingly compassionate answer. In the case of Scrooge, what changes his fundamental attitude is not any particular interest or reason. Said differently, he can start to see the importance of other people having interests of their own only when he acquires "a live sense of [himself] as, with others, bound toward death, of others as one's 'fellow passengers to the grave'" (Diamond, 1991, p. 49).

Similarly, Scrooge becomes generous toward children only after he "is touched by human childhood, the vulnerability of children, the intensity of their hopes, the depths of their fears and pains, their pleasures in their play, their joy in following stories" (Diamond, 1991, p. 42). What makes it possible for Scrooge to become available to the needs and



interests of children is not the force of those needs themselves, but rather the whole living-as-child that is characterized by mystery and vulnerability. In other words, it is a certain kind of moral imagination that Dickens, and Diamond, want us to recognize as being important. Dickens

*attempts to show us how an imaginative sense of the touchingness of childhood, tied to a sense of oneself as child, may be present in acts of humanity, and how its absence may also be felt in what we do and what we are capable of feeling. (Diamond, 1991, p. 42)*

Having an imaginative sense of what it is like to be a child is discernible through the way we act toward children, with generosity, kindheartedness, and so on. Being callous toward children may reveal a lack of such imaginative bonding. Notice here that there is no necessary relation between having a certain imaginative sense of another's life and acting in a certain way: imagination *may* be present in action. I think what Diamond is trying to get us to see is that there cannot be one criterion that determines the why and how of action, but that within the possible set of criteria there is a fundamental role for imaginative bonding.

The important role of the moral imagination in accurately representing, as well as the primacy of feeling and empathy in this process, is further illustrated by Diamond in writings that touch upon our imaginative identification with animal others. In discussing a poem of Walter de la Mare's about a titmouse, Diamond pauses on the expression the poet uses to refer to the mouse as a traveler between life and death (Diamond, 1978). The fact that the mouse *has a life*<sup>7</sup> is not of representative significance because it transmits biological knowledge. Having a life, in this sense, is not a biological fact; it acquires moral weight only when understood as the stimulation of a certain kind of fellowship with a creature that, despite the vast differences in embodiment, nonetheless participates in the same fundamental process that renders all vulnerable.

Literature stimulates the moral imagination regardless of whether the ones represented are human or animal others, and what Diamond allows us to see is that it does so by engaging fundamental mechanisms that are embedded in how we live and speak and that are able to allow us to travel in the direction of the other. In literature, we use the criterion of imaginative identification as a marker of a good representation of the characters: we say the author succeeded in representing the character well when as we can empathically imagine the character's particular subject-position. Stephen Mulhall, commenting on Diamond's use of Dickens, expresses the point of what the novelist is doing as an attempt "to attend to a child as a center of a distinctive view of the world, and so to attend to children in their own right" (2009, p. 8, *italics in original*). Similarly, what de la Mare's poem allows us to see is that a titmouse, in virtue of being a living subject, can (perhaps should) be traveled towards in a way that allows for an imaginative construction of its embodied position.

Mulhall develops at length, in *The Wounded Animal*, what exactly it is that the sympathetic imagination relies upon, or rather what it is that is common to embodiment such that sympathetic representation can work. For both human and nonhuman animals there are certain basic facts of embodiment—"they too are needy, dependent, subject to birth, sexuality, and death, vulnerable to pain and fear" (2009, p. 32)—that renders them *constitutively vulnerable*. The vulnerability of being embodied is not a matter of counting an exhaustive list of qualities one must share in order to be worthy of moral consideration, but rather itself the very basis of our ability to travel in the direction of another and to inhabit her position. Using J.M Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello as an example, Mulhall argues that it is "the fellowship of mortal creatures that provides our means of access to nonhuman animal being" and that this access is fraught with "resistance, contradiction, impossibility". This is because "understanding any manifestation of animal life, of finite embodied experience, is a matter of deploying our imaginative capacity to be dead and alive at the same time, and risking the panic-stricken collapse of our whole edifice of knowledge" (p. 47).

Inhabiting the perspective of another, or trying to answer the call to understand another's embodiment, is caught in deadly contradictions. Elizabeth Costello discusses the case of the people living in the vicinity of the Holocaust, those who supposedly did not know what was going on, though surely anyone who used their human capacities even to a minimal degree did know what was going on. This knowing while not knowing is one instance of the suppression of



the sympathetic imagination because of the difficulty that comes with heeding its call. But a similar contradiction, a kind of knowing and not knowing, is also characteristic of the proper use of moral imagination, which itself leads to suffering on behalf of the other, even if the other is not a subject in pain. There is a moment of death in leaving oneself behind in order to understand another, and a moment of unbearable contradiction in this flight from oneself only to inhabit a perspective as vulnerable—constitutively so—as one's own, and as incomplete and provisional. There is, in other words, a grave difficulty in sustaining the call of the moral imagination, and in this sense representation is always vulnerable to misrepresentation. One mark of at least an honest effort in representing might then be the extent to which a representative is willing, and able, to suffer the tensions inherent in truthfully representing another.

According to the literature I have been using, exemplified through Diamond, Mulhall, and Coetzee, there is no logical limit to the sympathetic imagination. Viveiros de Castro (2004) argues that, from an Amerindian perspective, objects themselves can be turned into subjects. Though this seems to violate the strict distinction between subject and object, what we are invited to contemplate is the possibility of an ontology that is defined by the life-force, what Viveiros de Castro calls the soul. He presents an Amerindian universalist ontology that postulates a unity of beings and a multiplicity of natures, what he calls perspectivism (p. 474). This seems to be an inversion of the western perspective that postulates a fixed nature, the world of facts, against the diversity of cultures. Instead, Amerindian cosmology postulates a variety of natures, because nature only lives, as it were, through relationships with subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Though de Castro's perspectivism is presented as the opposite of western ontology, Diamond's imaginative identification, particularly with animal others, can itself be seen as a form of perspectivism. In the western tradition we can also think of Merleau-Ponty's (1968; see also Carbone, 2004; Toadvine, 2009) immaterial flesh, as that which gives meaning to the world through the relationships between world and differently embodied subjects. For de Castro, the body "is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; body is ... an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*" (p. 475). The subject is, in other words, always already suffused with affective capacities that relate it to the world and to other subjects. Evoking a subject means, on this account, entering into imaginative relationships with it such that its affective integrity endures.

Taking de Castro's ontology and Diamond's remarks together, we are faced with the possibility of deep imaginative connection with an increased number of potential subjects. For representative practice this is a crucial step, particularly in the context of political practice at the planetary level, taking other-than-human beings and objects into account. Representing well relies, in no small part, on the ability of the representative utterance (the illocutionary of Austin) to evoke and temporarily fix in place the being of the other, nestled within the moral imagination of the relevant audience. The slide from illocutionary to constative that is typical of representative claims works on the basis of the moral imagination to sediment the status of the other as a proper subject, regardless of previous denials of its subjectivity.

I have been concerned here with analyzing what is at stake when we consider that representation is achieved well. The idea that evoking the other, in the senses discussed, is part of the norm of representation, gets us some way towards what good representation consists of. I have argued that when representation happens well, it does so on account of imaginatively connecting people in "commonality of need and joinedness of fate" (Diamond, 1991, p. 57). If this is correct, then what is normative of representative relations and claims is (in part) the evocation of subjects via the moral imagination, as affectively embodied, vulnerable, and therefore as morally equal to oneself. Recalling the discussion of normativity developed via Cavell, it is important to stress that evocative representation is not what one *ought* to do to represent well, but what one already does when representing well. One cannot say "you ought to represent in this or that way": inasmuch as we are representing at all, then we are already engaged in empathic evocation.

Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, Diamond says: "what it is that we are talking about is shown in how we talk about it" (Diamond, 1991, p. 60). What is normative of representative speech can easily be mimicked and used to provoke people to hate, not solidarity and empathy. Often in politics we watch the spectacle of demagogues connecting with people on account of their supposed ability to "tell it how it is," or to voice some concern or other that people feel is underrepresented. This abdication of the norm while maintaining its superficial form is a great danger of political

representation, and particularly of representation understood as interest translation, which too easily slides into oppositional and irreconcilable positions. I think that this is the limitation of Saward's implied normative assessment—audience recognition—as well as Disch's insistence on opposition and strife as the ultimate norm of representation. If we deny the importance of the basic commonality that makes us responsive to other beings, we enter into a position where the norm of representation is not based on how we in fact respond morally to each other's being but on our ability to shut off our moral imagination to one or another perceived harm.

This being said, the ability to parrot the form of evocative representation while abdicating its content is not only a technique developed by demagogues, but rather a capacity internal to the kinds of subjects that human beings are. The difficulty of sustaining the sympathetic imagination, its tensions and contradictions, is not given only as a reflection of the other's suffering but is inherent in imaginative flight inasmuch as it presupposes some measure of death, of erasure, on behalf of the imagining subject. Embodied vulnerability is both a fact of the constitutive frailty of embodiment and of the moral frailty given by the difficulty of the demands of the sympathetic imagination. In other words, misrepresentation is not only always possible, but often attractive: it presents us with the option of knowing without knowing, and therefore of "knowing" without suffering. There is then no way to shield ourselves (for example, procedurally) against misrepresentation. The only hope is a kind of moral hygiene upheld in the community, a call to understand truthfully that is reiterated and enforced by a critical number of members in a community and through the selection mechanisms of representation. Any such arrangement can only be temporary, as the demands of being pulsate more incessantly and intensely than the frail fibers of moral vigilance.

This account gives us new grounds for judging the extent to which representation has been achieved well. The representative claim can be judged in light of the extent to which it engages its duty to understand the constitutive vulnerability of the other. Its success or failure cannot be easily decided on procedural grounds only. It needs, first and foremost, an ethical analysis of its content. Importantly, the *a priori* dismissal of potential subjects of representation cannot work with the requirements of the sympathetic imagination, and should therefore immediately disqualify the representativeness of the claim.

I want to end with an example of good representation. What I have argued in this article is not limited to the representation of human beings and, in many ways, it is perhaps easier to see the force of moral imagination when not applied to humans. On a popular blog titled *Humans of New York*, photographer Brandon Stanton posts pictures (mostly portraits or details of a person's body, pointing towards the fundamentally affective nature of embodiment), together with captions taken from his conversation with the photographed subject. On 6 July 2015, a picture of someone's hands was accompanied by a caption that detailed how this person's marriage had deteriorated because of his spouse's mental illness. Because of the illness, we learn, the spouse had become cruel and unfeeling. "I stay out until midnight every night because I don't want to go home", the person says. He describes the ills he has suffered, ending with: "then in November he killed my dog. She was an old Rottweiler. She wasn't in the best health, but she certainly wasn't dying. He just called me at the theater and said: 'I took your dog to the hospital. She's dead.' ... I just keep thinking about how scared my dog must have been."

That last sentence—"I just keep thinking about how scared my dog must have been"—can be so wounding because of how it expresses the dog as a fellow traveler toward death. We immediately understand the fear that the dog, as an embodied creature, a subject, must have felt; we too feel it in our throat. And on account of that, it is a great representative claim. It allows us to name the crime accurately, because the subject has been well voiced and remembered. Though the dog would presumably be incapable of feeling represented, we know that she was, in this case, represented well.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This expression is borrowed from Diamond (1978).

- <sup>2</sup> Rehfeld presents an argument that divorces the issue of representation from the normative commitments of democracy, suggesting that representatives can exist, and do in fact exist, even though they might not be democratically elected.
- <sup>3</sup> In this highly influential piece, Mansbridge argues for the existence of different forms of representation—namely, promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic, and surrogate—which come to complement and, in some sense, replace, the more traditional forms of trustee and delegate. The forms of representation each come with particular normative criteria that tell us whether representation has been achieved well. The four forms of representation that Mansbridge theorizes come with three kinds of normative criteria, namely deliberative, systemic, and plural, which complement more standard accounts of substantive representation as relying on congruence between representative and constituents. The arguments I present here are not meant to refute the validity of this kind of analysis, but to complement existing thinking on normativity and representation.
- <sup>4</sup> This leaves open the possibility of tragedy: one may be unable, for reasons everyone finds objective, to achieve a norm that is also universally endorsed.
- <sup>5</sup> There is nothing wrong with democratic prescriptions, but those cannot provide an answer to the question motivating this article. In this sense, contributions such as that of Dovi (2007) are very important in establishing prescriptive representation, but are not necessarily answers to the question of normativity.
- <sup>6</sup> In other writings, Diamond (1978) is concerned with showing that this way of thinking about what motivates moral action is often reflected in animal advocacy, for example, in the utilitarianism of Peter Singer (1975). Also see Crary, 2007a, 2007b).
- <sup>7</sup> This expression of Diamond's is contrasted with the idea that having a life is a biological fact. As a biological fact, it is morally meaningless; it acquires moral weight when understood as an expression that signals a certain kind of fellowship, allows the listener to contemplate the mystery of another's life, to be touched by someone else having a life to lead.
- <sup>8</sup> De Castro's ontological arguments are but one example of a kind of thinking that challenges the dominant Western conceptions of personhood, subjectivity, human and nature. On the whole there is no single ontological conception common to all human cultures, and this testifies to the malleability and limitlessness of what I refer to here as the sympathetic imagination. For more examples of thinking that inhabits what seems, to others, impossible to inhabit, also see Bird-David's "Animism" *Revisited* (1999).

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