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William E. Connolly's Politics of Complexity: A Critique

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Abstract: In recent years, William E. Connolly has argued that the phenomenon of complexity in the physical sciences carries radical implications for political theory: namely, that political theorists should now be revising their concepts of agency, responsibility, and freedom. This very recent project of Connolly's has not (yet) attracted much opposition. Here I offer a critique of Connolly's argument which focuses on three key areas: (1) how he interprets and deploys "evidence" from physical science; (2) his theory of "*creative* freedom"; and (3) the impact that his recent philosophy has on the idea of the intellect. I argue that Connolly's scientific evidence is not what he claims it is; that the theory of "creative freedom" he offers fails; and that his critique of the intellect fails in theory, and would be highly damaging in practice.

> The universe is change; life is judgment.
>
> —Marcus Aurelius

Connolly's "World of Becoming" Thesis

William E. Connolly's work is well known among political theorists, and much of it—including titles such as *The Terms of Political Discourse, Politics and Ambiguity*, and *Political Theory and Modernity*[1]—is very highly regarded. In 2009 Matthew J. Moore conducted a survey of over a thousand political theorists in the United States, asking them which figures they thought had had the

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[1]William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1974); Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

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greatest impact on the political theory of the last twenty years. Connolly came fourth, behind John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault.[2]

But Connolly's recent work is very different from that which established his reputation in earlier decades. His change of direction, his "turn to affect,"[3] is discernible from *Why I Am Not a Secularist* and *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* forward.[4] Since then Connolly has been developing what is known as his "deep pluralism."[5] For Connolly, conventional pluralism is confined by an "unconscious conservatism" in the way it presupposes "the normal individual."[6] But *deep* pluralism understands individuals and/or identities as inherently ambiguous and contested as well—unstable, volatile, "fragile," existing always in a state of "becoming," *affect*ed, comprising the meeting of various elements, "forces," or "energies."[7] Such description, Connolly argues, applies not only to individual persons and groups of people, but also to their thoughts, decisions, and all the objects and systems with which they interact.[8] The scale of Connolly's "world of becoming" thesis, then, is sufficiently universal that he can call it an "ontocosmology,"[9] and he presents it as a new alternative to what he takes to be the two approaches to the universe dominant hitherto: the first being that the universe is "mechanistic" (and therefore that the future is "contained in the present"[10]), and the other that the universe is governed by God.[11]

[2]Matthew J. Moore, "Political Theory Today: Results of a National Survey," paper delivered at APSA meeting, Toronto, 2009. Available at http://ssrn.com/abstract=1463648.

[3]Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434. See also Thomas L. Dumm, "Connolly's Voice," in *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition*, ed. David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 77.

[4]William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). For Connolly's own account of how and why he has turned his attention to neuroscience, see *Neuropolitics*, xiii. Some features of this change of direction appear in earlier works as well, as in some of the essays that comprise *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). Connolly writes there that the "micropolitics" he pursues "supports the macropolitics of pluralization" (xxvii; see also xii–xv).

[5]Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver, ed. *William E. Connolly: Democracy, Pluralism and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008), 85–104. See also Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 128–30; and William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 84.

[6]*Ethos*, xiii–xiv.

[7]Connolly, *Secularist*, 57; Connolly, *World*, 127; William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 178.

[8]*World*, 5.

[9]*Fragility*, 9.

[10]*World*, 45.

[11]*World*, 43; see also Chambers and Carver, *William E. Connolly*, 85.

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Connolly's recent work is also marked by scattered discussions of what he offers as "evidence"[12] for the world of becoming: namely, certain discoveries in physical science on every scale—geology, oceanography, and (importantly) biology and neuroscience[13]—particularly those discoveries pertaining to "complexity theory." Connolly explains that scientists have lately been discovering that the complex systems (i.e., those with many interacting components) studied in various fields can (1) produce novel phenomena that *could not* have been predicted in advance, and (2) *self*-organize.[14] These processes happen, Connolly explains, without the involvement of any sort of intelligence. But nevertheless such systems are "creative,"[15] in the sense of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*: their complex structures, whether comprising human or nonhuman forces, or both,[16] produce novel phenomena by way of a "mysterious"[17] process in which the various forces comprising the system meet and interact in a way that is (Connolly says) clearly not reducible to some *mechanism* which can be known and used by humans to make predictions. "For in a world of becoming," he writes, "the new periodically comes into being in ways that defeat attempts to generalize from past regularities to a reliable future."[18] This mysterious process is called "emergence," or "emergent causality."[19] Furthermore, the emergent phenomena of one complex system often trigger new responses in another/others; so such systems are not only *not mechanical*, they are also "open" rather than "closed" to other systems.[20] In view of such discoveries in science, Connolly urges political theorists to draw "into close communication a philosophy of becoming."[21]

The Politics of Complexity

But "herein resides the problem," Connolly says: "Those thinkers most attuned to a cosmos of becoming… "—and he names Stuart Kauffman, Ilya Prigogine, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze among others[22]—"have been rather inactive in bringing these insights to the ecology of late capitalism."[23] It is Connolly's intention to address this shortcoming, to bring out,

[12]*World*, 6, 39, 40, 68; *Fragility*, 29, 85.
[13]*Fragility*, 29.
[14]For examples see *World*, 15, 18, 77–78; and *Fragility*, 33–34, 81–97.
[15]*Neuropolitics*, 1; *Fragility*, 156.
[16]*Fragility*, 35.
[17]*World*, 80; see also 38.
[18]*World*, 35.
[19]*World*, 44.
[20]*World*, 7; see also, 9, 12, 17–19, 20, 27, 30, 37–39, 43, 83, 136–37, 146–47, 149, 155–56, 171–73; and *Fragility*, 26.
[21]*Fragility*, 29.
[22]*World*, 37.
[23]*Fragility*, 30.

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in other words, the impact that affect and becoming, as a worldview now increasingly "evidenced" by the discovery of complexity and emergent phenomena in physical science, should have on political theory and political practice/activism.[24]

The impact Connolly presents is fundamental and far-reaching: it concerns "traditional" (or "classical," or "received"[25]) models of human (1) *knowledge* and (2) *agency* that are based on reliable prediction, intellectual understanding, and rational deliberation. For Connolly, these traditional models are to be associated with the old and ostensibly discredited idea that we humans are or should be in some way *separate* from the complex processes going on around us, and possessed of the capacity to predict and control (or "master"[26]) them. Connolly identifies what he calls "the anthropic exception"[27] to the worldview he endorses with the assumption that the investigator "has special standing… above or outside the regularities governing nature,"[28] and this assumption he identifies with a wide range of targets: "analytic philosophers, rational choice theorists, deliberative democrats and 'intellectualists' of various sorts,"[29] "devotees of transcendence,"[30] and Augustine and Kant.[31] In Connolly's view, all of these are overturned by the new "world of becoming" thesis.

Now this project of "problematizing"[32] the autonomous agency, will, and responsibility of the individual has been a consistent feature of Connolly's work since long before he began to discuss physical science in such detail.[33] Mark Redhead has also recognized that these metaphysical positions have in fact "been embedded within Connolly's work since its early days."[34] But it is only recently that Connolly has begun to claim that such revisions as he has been recommending would bring the human sciences into line with the physical sciences.[35] For Connolly, the erroneous "traditional" models of

[24]For a good discussion of Connolly's position on the relation between theory and practice, see Morton Schoolman, "A Pluralist Mind: Agonistic Respect and the Problem of Violence toward Difference," in *The New Pluralism*, 28–32.

[25]*World*, 7, 17.

[26]*World*, 10.

[27]*World*, 21, 25, 148.

[28]*World*, 148.

[29]*World*, 47–48.

[30]*World*, 64.

[31]*World*, 148–50; *Fragility*, 135.

[32]*World*, 29.

[33]See William E. Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 111–14; see also 95–122; and *Ethos*, xxiv–xxx.

[34]Mark Redhead, *Reasoning with Who We Are: Democratic Theory for a Not So Liberal Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 280.

[35]*World*, 168.

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human agency and deliberation according to which (he thinks) most political theory operates have contributed to "vengeful cultural orientations to crime and punishment" (he is thinking especially of capital punishment),[36] "stingy conceptions of distributive justice," "narrow definitions of self-interest," "dismissive stories about those who are down and out," "severe accusations against those outside your country, class, ethnicity, faith, or sexuality," and "refusals to acknowledge and address the fragility of things";[37] "practices of capitalist greed, religious exclusivity, media bellicosity, authoritarian strategies, sexual narrowness, and military aggression."[38] The exact process by which traditional models of human agency and thinking have generated these things is never entirely clear; Connolly is mostly content with the explanation that such ideas "resonate" or "reverberate" with other "resentments."[39] But Connolly *is* clear that to improve our engagement with the world (i.e., both *knowing* it and *acting* in it) we must abandon those traditional models that *deny* the world of becoming, and instead *affirm* becoming by seeing individuals as parts of complex, creative, open systems that (1) go far beyond individuals and (2) penetrate deep within them. This, he thinks, will open us up to what our politics really needs.

Although Connolly does outline some specific practical policies, mostly he avoids specific political prescriptions, and prefers to discuss the emergence of a global network of countermovements, which he calls "a political resonance machine."[40] This movement will be "composed of multiple constituencies,"[41] it will be based on "timely militancy"[42] and "experimental micropolitics"[43] (especially "role experimentation"[44]), and it will infuse "a new ethos into the fabric of everyday life"[45]—an ethos of "visceral attachment" to life and

[36]See *Secularist*, 133–36.

[37]*Fragility*, 179–80; *World*, 139–40; *Secularist*, 55. See also William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 63.

[38]*World*, 66.

[39]*Capitalism*, 44; see also 51–54; and *World*, 12, 13, 61; and *Fragility*, 18, 28, 39, 125, 127, 133, 138–39, 147, 170–80, 204n4. "Resentment" and "affirmation" feature heavily in Connolly's recent work. Connolly means the resentment one might feel when the world is discovered or claimed to be different from what one might have wanted (see *World*, 112). He very often describes, for example, the resentment of a "nonprovidential" world (*Capitalism*, 41, 58), and of *time* (*Capitalism*, 57; *World*, 106, 119–20).

[40]*World*, 41, 135–47.

[41]Ibid.

[42]*Fragility*, 136–37.

[43]*Fragility*, 38; see also 182.

[44]*Fragility*, 179–95; see also *World*, 143–44.

[45]*Fragility*, 40, see particularly 130–37; and *World*, 41.

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the world,[46] and of cultivating generosity and gratitude for being[47] through working "tactically upon yourself."[48]

But although Connolly's ideas for political engagement are intended to be of use to activists, the major implications of affirming the world of becoming that he discusses are on the level of theory. Because two of these in particular are the subject of the present critique, I will deal with his arguments concerning them in special detail.

The Redistribution of Agency

In Connolly's view, political theory today must revise its "widely received ideas about the meaning and distribution of agency."[49] "Agency," in the sense of some capacity for individual autonomy, has traditionally been understood to underpin the notion that individuals are individually responsible for what they say and do,[50] at least sometimes. The fundamental principle of "deep pluralism," however, is that the individual itself should be pluralized, and for Connolly this represents a radical break from the traditional notion of individual agency. Towards this conclusion Connolly argues two points.

First, nonhuman forces should be considered to have *more* agency than previously thought. The neuroanthropologist Stuart Kauffman, Connolly explains, identifies "processes in lower organisms that bear family resemblances to human agency" and "says that 'the agency that arises with life brings values, meaning and action into the universe,' and stresses that 'agency reaches beyond humans.'"[51] One such "family resemblance" is the agent's appearing to want and/or pursue things, such as the bacterium, which "is attracted to sugar; it pursues it as an end; it adjusts its behaviour to pursue its end; and it feels satisfaction when it achieves the end intended." So even the bacterium "possesses *some* characteristics of agency so defined."[52] Another of Connolly's examples of nonhuman agency is alcoholism, which, "once its drive to satisfaction is installed in brain synapses, acts as a micro-agent."[53] There are "different degrees of agency in other force-fields with which we interact,"[54] Connolly argues, especially in other self-organizing

[46]*World*, 57.

[47]*Neuropolitics*, 106; *World*, 41.

[48]*World*, 26; see also 57.

[49]*World*, 12, emphasis added. The witness Connolly calls most often in connection with this necessity is Stuart A. Kauffman: see *World*, 12, 20–21, 23–24, 26, 28–31, 37, 165, 173; and *Fragility*, 29–30, 83, 161, 163, 218n8, 221, 222n22.

[50]See *World*, 22.

[51]*World*, 24.

[52]*World*, 24; see also C. R. Hayward, "Ethics, Politics, and the Limits of Reason," *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (April 2012): 240.

[53]*World*, 27; see also *Secularist*, 3.

[54]*World*, 7.

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systems,[55] which *interfere* with our brain chemistry, *affect* our thinking, and *influence* our actions. Verbs of this sort—"interfering," "affecting," "influencing"—are the essence of Connolly's definition of agency; so he concludes that nonhuman forces that perform such functions outside and within an individual are actually part of the "structure" of a person's agency.[56]

Second, and following on from this, Connolly argues that although humans do indeed have agency (because they affect things), and although their agency "involves much more than proto-agency,"[57] they should nevertheless be considered to have *less* agency than traditionally assumed. Human agency is "limited" by all the other things that affect human thought and action:[58] we are affected by microbes and hormones inside us, such as testosterone, adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine, which "are what Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour would call 'actants,' microforces with variations and powers that flow into the brain's higher *decision-making areas* to help accelerate, decelerate, intensify, or dampen complex decisions."[59] There are also external forces affecting us: "sunlight, electrical shocks, insulting statements, magnetic fields, a raging sea, inspirational actions, and so on."[60] For Connolly these "actants," small or large, internal or external, affect reasoning itself—and on both sides of the "classical"[61] distinction between theoretical reason ("making up your mind *that*") and practical reason ("making up your mind *to*").[62] It follows, Connolly says, that individuals are so *affect*ed that there is in fact never a central decision-making "I" to be blamed for a thought or action; innumerable nonhuman elements within the complex process are what are really "decisive." No single one of these forces is the primary decision-maker; complex processes within (and without) agents generate phenomena *emergently*.[63] So as individuals we are not "consummate agents,"[64] Connolly argues; each of us is "a complex assemblage of heterogeneous elements bound loosely together";[65] although we indeed have intentions and consciousness, these are "the end point of activity already underway."[66] Agency is an emergent phenomenon;[67] "its agency and our

[55]*World*, 21, 23, 24.
[56]*Secularist*, 120, 174.
[57]*World*, 25.
[58]*World*, 25; see also 15, 25, 27, 32, 82; and *Fragility*, 128.
[59]*Fragility*, 84–85, emphasis added; see also *Neuropolitics*, 1–21.
[60]*World*, 150; see also *Neuropolitics*, 75.
[61]*World*, 23.
[62]See R. G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Civilization and Barbarism* (1942) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 100.
[63]*Fragility*, 34.
[64]*World*, 7.
[65]*World*, 27.
[66]*World*, 25.
[67]*World*, 23.

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agency become blended together";[68] thoughts themselves are emergent phenomena.[69] And what we have been calling the "will" is in fact "an *emergent*, biocultural formation."[70] "The 'you,'" Connolly writes, addressing his reader, "refers to intra-individual, micro- and macro-assemblages of desire."[71]

For Connolly, then, the individual person is a *multiplicity*, as Deleuze said it should be; today there is scientific "evidence" proving that each of us is composed of multiple "micro-agents."[72] And it follows, Connolly concludes, that political theorists must cultivate a more "*distributive* image" of agency[73] in which actions and behaviors are attributed no longer (entirely) to the traditional "I," but to an *assemblage* of actants. Given the fact that actants are within and without us, this "redistribution" of agency should be both downwards, to natural microprocesses, and upwards, to processes on a larger scale.[74] The answer that Connolly thinks this gives to the manifestations of the traditional models of thought and action outlined above—"vengeful cultural orientations to crime and punishment," "stingy conceptions of distributive justice," "dismissive stories about those who are down and out," and so forth—is that individual responsibility is now discovered, ostensibly by science, to be incalculably mitigated. Our "notions of masterful agency" are, Connolly says, "compromised,"[75] and the "hubris" of the "anthropic exception" is curtailed.[76]

Critique

Connolly's problematization of individual agency and reason in political theory has not yet attracted much attention among his readers, let alone opposition from them.[77] The essays collected by Alan Finlayson and by Campbell and Schoolman[78] focus on his contributions to more conventional debates in political theory: pluralism in the more conventional sense, rights, democracy, violence, difference, and so forth. That his arguments are going unopposed is especially true of his deployment of science to support the

[68]*World*, 64.
[69]*World*, 76, 78.
[70]*World*, 82; see also 27, 64; and *Fragility*, 127–30.
[71]*World*, 123.
[72]*World*, 27.
[73]*World*, 21–22, emphasis added.
[74]*World*, 22.
[75]*Fragility*, 14.
[76]*World*, 25.
[77]See, however, Hayward, "Ethics." Ruth Leys's critique ("The Turn to Affect") is aimed chiefly at Brian Massumi, though Connolly is also discussed (459–63).
[78]Alan Finlayson, ed., *Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Campbell and Schoolman, eds., *The New Pluralism*.

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problematization of agency and reason—partly, I assume, because that "turn" is only very recent. Mark Redhead, whose *Reasoning with Who We Are* was recently discussed in the *Review of Politics*, does mention Connolly's interest in complexity science,[79] but his discussion is not detailed, and complexity science does not feature at all in his "lessons learned from Connolly."[80]

There are, however, good reasons to pay attention to this aspect of Connolly's recent work, but to greet it with substantial reservations. First, Connolly's use of science to support his political arguments does not provide the "evidence" that he claims it does.[81] Second, the theory of freedom he proposes, and claims to be consequent upon the rethinking of agency, appears on closer inspection to fail. And finally the impact of Connolly's philosophy on the standing of those functions of mind commonly called "intellectual" is deleterious, with probable exacerbating effects on the very environmental politics that are of increasing importance to his work. I will take these three criticisms in this order below.

But before I detail these reservations, I should explain how I understand the historical background of the following critique. Connolly presents his work in this area as something very new, in view of both the apparently cutting-edge science upon which it is based and the radical, "experimental" political implications that follow from it. His recent work addresses "a new pluralist assemblage," frequently promising "new directions," new "possibilities," "new pressures," new "experiments," "new experiences," "new and surprising events," "new sensitivities," new "unions" or "arrangements," new "ways to belong to time," and so on.[82] What is especially new, he thinks, is the cross-fertilization of these two areas of interest, complexity science and political theory/activism, to bear the fruit of one comprehensive worldview uniting processes of becoming from the microbial level to the macropolitical and beyond.[83]

Actually many of the arguments and tropes Connolly is now deploying have already been targeted in two large critical works of the 1920s by the British author and painter, Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), many of whose targets are figures cited by Connolly as particularly inspiring: above all, Henri Bergson, Samuel Alexander, A. N. Whitehead, and William James.[84] The thematic overlap of what Wyndham Lewis *attacks* and what Connolly is today *offering* is very striking. Lewis himself is drawing on earlier critics

[79]See Redhead, *Reasoning with Who We Are*, 292.

[80]Ibid., 310–12.

[81]See *World*, 6, 39, 40, 68; and *Fragility*, 29, 85.

[82]Respectively: *World*, 144; 11, 145; 144; *Fragility*, 38–39; *World*, 145; 146; 26; *Fragility*, 167; *World*, 15–16.

[83]The term "macropolitical" is Connolly's own: *Ethos*, xxvi.

[84]For a neat explanation of the role of James in Connolly's "deep pluralist" project, see Chambers and Carver, *William E. Connolly*, 85–104.

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of Bergson's philosophy, especially Julien Benda.[85] The broad lesson here is that the worldview expounded by Bergson is not so new in political theory that it does not already have some major critics who should be faced by those carrying these ideas forward. Of course Connolly also draws on many more recent writers and, as we have seen, on recent science. But although I have had to "update" Lewis's criticisms of what he (like Deleuze)[86] calls "Bergsonism" so that they might fairly be applied to Connolly's work, nevertheless I owe it to the reader to acknowledge the historical foundations of what I am saying here.

Now, it seems to me that one of Lewis's observations in particular illuminates a fundamental problem with those writings of Connolly's in which the "world of becoming" thesis is illustrated. Here Lewis uses the term "flux," which was commoner among early commentators on Bergson than it is now—though Connolly himself uses it occasionally.[87] (Elsewhere Lewis uses the term "becoming," which today is usually preferred.) He writes:

> So, to start with, it is probably as well to point out that no Western philosopher who has ever lived has denied that there is a constant empirical flux and change in time, at least in appearance. Plato, in this respect, gives exactly the same account of things as Heraclitus. It is not there that the capital antithesis in traditional philosophy is to be sought. The radical difference between one kind of doctrine and another has consisted in whether it was held that there was anything *besides*, behind, or over and above the Flux, or whether, on the other hand, there was nothing but that.[88]

What Lewis says here brings certain of Connolly's shortcomings into focus. First, the greater part of each of Connolly's recent books is devoted to building up the very view that Lewis thinks no one really denies: that there is a constant empirical process of change, or "becoming," in the world—to which end Connolly collects not only examples from physical science, but also from thematically complementary theology and film.[89] The conclusion can validly be drawn from the science Connolly cites that many of the world's natural and human systems affect each other, appear to be connected, and appear to organize themselves in some way. It is not clear, however, that this has ever been in doubt either. Today it is common knowledge that the effects of human activity on the world's natural systems are far-reaching and complex, and those

[85]Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 9.

[86]Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

[87]See *World*, 44, 105.

[88]Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (1927) (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1993), 232–33.

[89]See *World*, 68–92.

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predictions have their limitations and margins of error. So what Connolly says is a "creative leap"[90] of worldview, affirmable only by embracing a "philosophy of becoming,"[91] is in fact a leap through an open door.

Second, although Lewis is talking about "Western philosophers" generally, his observation seems especially true of political theorists. It is very difficult to identify a political philosopher who has denied that the physical and human worlds are in a state of "becoming" (or motion), that individuals and groups change, that they are affected by things (and many different *sorts* of things) inside and outside of themselves, that they change their minds, and their behavior is often unpredictable, and so forth. It seems that Connolly is caricaturing "traditional" political theory when he implies that it denies any of this. In fact the attempt to deal with change in some sense, and with people being affected by outside forces, inner "passions," and so on would seem to be evident in every political thinker in every tradition. And yet, of course, many political theorists who have "affirmed" a world in which such phenomena are acknowledged have drawn very different political conclusions from Connolly about agency, responsibility, and freedom. Hobbes, for whom also the workings of the mind are but matter in motion, and humans greatly affected by outside pressures,[92] is but one obvious example.[93] So Connolly's conclusions concerning agency and the rest can by no means be assumed to follow necessarily from accepting the world of *becoming* and *affect* that he describes.

Connolly's conclusion, however, goes further, because (thirdly) he seems to think his selected scientists are all the time confirming that there is *nothing but becoming* in the world. This pertains to what Wyndham Lewis thinks is "the real question": whether anything is *exempt* from becoming. This should be Connolly's focus, because he wants to show that the individual and his/her reason, will, and responsibility cannot legitimately be posited "above" becoming and/or separate from affect. But Connolly deals with that question relatively sporadically, because he thinks the examples drawn from "large scale" complexity science show that becoming is a sort of universal pattern. For him, the same scientific advances that show systems to be uncertain, open, and deeply plural have also *falsified* the traditional image of the individual agent, replete with individual will and reason, and "responsible" for what it says and does. It is highly questionable, however, that examples of natural self-organization and emergent phenomena drawn from oceanography (for example) tell us anything about human agency and reason other than by

[90]*World*, 13.

[91]*Fragility*, 29.

[92]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (1651) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–15.

[93]From this same premise Hobbes concludes that while the individual "person" is concrete and natural, groups are artificial—the same position that Connolly criticizes George Kateb for holding: see *Secularist*, 139.

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already assuming that they are analogous manifestations of a pattern from which nothing is exempt.

The sciences that might more legitimately support Connolly's deep pluralization of agency and thought are those that investigate brain processes. His use of neuroscience, however, focused mostly but not exclusively in *Neuropolitics*, introduces more problems. Ruth Leys has already highlighted the tendency of the "new affect theorists" (among whom she includes Connolly)[94] to "impose" interpretations on the findings of scientists.[95] These "Deleuze-inspired affect theorists,"[96] Leys writes, are "gripped by the notion that most philosophers… have overvalued the role of reason and rationality in politics";[97] they "seek to recast biology in dynamic, energistic, nondeterministic terms that emphasize its unpredictable and potentially emancipatory qualities";[98] "what fundamentally binds together the new affect theorists and the neuroscientists," she observes, "is their *shared anti-intentionalism*."[99] Leys focuses on what she argues are the misleading selections and interpretations of science in the work of Brian Massumi. Let us see whether Connolly's recent work evinces the same impairment.

Connolly's "Conversations" with Science

Connolly's use of the physical sciences (including neuroscience) fails to demonstrate that the "traditional" image of the individual agent has indeed been falsified, and for two reasons. First, his principle of selection is itself unscientific, and very often takes the reader away from the scientific mainstream (though by no means always). Connolly seems to recognize that he does this, but does not recognize it as a failing: his task is "to draw selective sustenance."[100] Elsewhere he admits that, although "there are, of course, neuroscientists who advance a more closed reading as they pursue an autonomous science," he is only interested "in those who seek productive interfaces with cultural theory in which each makes a contribution to the other."[101] The problem is that it is Connolly himself who determines what is a "productive interface" and what counts as a "contribution," and he discusses only that work that supports anti-intentionalism—or that seems on *his* account to support it. He does not address counterevidence or exceptions to the

[94]See Leys, "Turn to Affect," 469.
[95]Ibid., 450.
[96]Ibid., 443.
[97]Ibid., 436.
[98]Ibid., 458.
[99]Ibid., 443.
[100]*Fragility*, 178; see also *World*, 11.
[101]William E. Connolly, "The Complexity of Intention," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 791–98.

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discoveries he cites. Although he mentions, for example, the "many scientists, philosophers, theorists, and citizens" who do *not* share "the conception of time in which my question is posed" (that is, the conception "time as becoming"[102]), but adopt instead "a punctual, linear conception of secular time most at home with itself in conjunction with an observational image of inquiry,"[103] he does not say who these scientists are, or explain their relationship to the mainstream scientific community, or deal with the object, rigor, and conclusions of their science. Neither does he explain what inquiry should be based upon if not observation. His judgment also seems to be discounting a great deal of what would be recognized as credible to mainstream scientists. He draws heavily, for instance, on Stuart Kauffman, whose writings on science argue that there is empirical evidence for the existence of God;[104] he also cites the neuroscientist Francisco Varela, who argues that science can gain "insights" from Buddhist practices;[105] but only occasionally admits that he is only dealing with "some strains" of science,[106] or a "minority movement."[107]

Second, Connolly takes too many liberties with his interpretations of natural science, and consequently his "evidence" typically appears more favorable to his political arguments than it really is.[108] Ruth Leys has already exposed the "new affect theorists'" misleading interpretation of experiments showing a "half-second delay" in reflex systems[109]—of which Connolly also makes heavy use[110]—so I will not repeat her work. But again, Connolly is open about the liberties he takes. He talks of putting neuroscience and cultural theory "into conversation,"[111] "folding" one idea into another,[112] of neuroscientists and cultural theorists "encountering" each other,[113] and admits that to do so is "to draw these findings into a perspective

[102]*World*, 9–12.

[103]*World*, 148.

[104]Stuart A. Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), ix.

[105]*Neuropolitics*, 93.

[106]*World*, 7.

[107]*Neuropolitics*, 93.

[108]Connolly probably ought to have been extra aware of this. He writes of René Girard: "Girard claims that his readings vindicate his theory of desire; but it must also be said that his theory of desire gives shape to those readings. It may be impossible to avoid such a (hermeneutic) circularity, but the dogmatism with which Girard presents his interpretations of myth and desire alike does belie the problematical standing such circles bestow upon them" (*Ethos*, 51).

[109]Leys, "Turn to Affect," 452–59.

[110]See *Neuropolitics*, 33, 83; and *World*, 46, 49, 50, 58, 82, 151.

[111]*Neuropolitics*, 2; see also 7, 9; *World*, 12, 43; and *Fragility*, 161.

[112]*World*, 45.

[113]*World*, 48.

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that is not entirely that of the neuroscientists themselves."[114] "Again," he says later, "these views contain considerable extrapolation and speculation."[115] But Connolly does not seem to recognize this as a weakness: "Speculation," he says, "is unavoidable in these domains today."[116] Indeed he seems to think that "augmenting" science[117] with concepts imported from thinkers in other fields, such as Nietzsche, Deleuze, and William James, is a *strength* of his work: "the new neuroscience," he claims, "*need*[*s*] augmentation from cultural theory."[118]

Let us assess the validity and value of this "augmentation" by comparing the words of Connolly's selected scientists with the "evidence" he claims they provide for his political claims. Corresponding with Connolly's two related arguments already outlined—that nonhumans have *more* agency than traditionally thought, and that humans have *less* or more-*limited* agency than traditionally thought—are the two types of study Connolly involves in his argument. The first are those that deal with nonhuman agency and, on Connolly's reading, reveal and verify it. These are discussed and elaborated especially in *A World of Becoming* and *The Fragility of Things*. The second are those that deal with human agency and, on Connolly's reading, falsify the traditional account of it. *Neuropolitics* focuses on this more internal side of the "agency" argument.

Connolly's use of Bonnie Bassler's TED talk on quorum sensing in bacteria[119] is typical of how he has recently been reporting the discovery and verification of "agency" among nonhuman entities. Bassler investigates how bacterial cells react to the presence of other bacteria and, in order to explain what bacteria do in plain language, she describes bacteria playing "roles" in our lives, not being "passive," "recognizing," "talk[ing] with a chemical language," "talking with chemical words," and so on. Connolly concludes, from Bassler's explanation, that "bacteria exhibit a degree of collective agency"; he calls the bacterium a "proto-agent" and a "dark precursor to human agency," and adds that we should appreciate the "connections" between human agency and microbiological processes of this sort.[120] But for all the anthropomorphic language Bassler uses, she does not mention "agency" once. Indeed, she describes very clearly, and in fascinating detail, the "mechanism" underlying the biochemical reactions she is talking about. This "mechanism" is ignored by Connolly, perhaps because it fits uneasily with the idea of bacteria as "agents" and with Connolly's preferred model of emergent causality. It also points to the scientific achievements of

[114]*Neuropolitics*, 7.
[115]*Neuropolitics*, 61.
[116]Ibid.; see also *Fragility*, 118–19.
[117]*Neuropolitics*, xiii; *World*, 12.
[118]*Neuropolitics*, xiii.
[119]*World*, 24.
[120]Ibid.; for Connolly's similar use of yeast see 28.

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prediction and control which in fact underpin the possible future use of new knowledge about bacteria for medicine, which Bassler also discusses, but Connolly prefers to ignore.

Connolly's readings in neuroscience, as I have said, would seem to be more promising for his arguments about human thought and action. In *Neuropolitics* he cites the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who studies how a person's sensory, motor, and emotional memories seem to be related to their "dispositions" and to the decisions they make. According to Connolly, Damasio "seconds many of the things Bergson says"—though he also admits that Damasio "seems unaware of how closely his account tracks Bergson's theory."[121] In one of Damasio's studies, a patient with brain damage was unable to make quick decisions, which is thought to be due to his loss of "somatic markers" which, in turn, are thought to highlight "options."[122] Quickly, however, Connolly is concluding that "rational choice theory and the reduction of culture to an unlayered set of intersubjective concepts and beliefs are thrown into jeopardy" by this study;[123] "the model of 'deliberative democracy,' loved by many political theorists, requires modification too," he adds.[124] Actually Damasio's work says nothing about rational choice theory, or indeed about "rationality" at all—that is, about whether people are, can be, or should be rational. He says nothing about the meaning of "culture," and nothing about what the "deliberative" part of "deliberative democracy" assumes. Neither has he any use for the noun "affect" or, importantly, for the concept of *agency*. In fact, from none of what Connolly quotes Damasio saying does the neuroscientist appear to think that his work investigates agency at all.

Connolly also cites the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, who studies the functioning of the amygdala and who, according to Connolly, "confirm[s] the indispensability of affect to thinking."[125] LeDoux explains that "when the amygdala detects danger… the result is the release of a hormone called ACTH… [which] flows through the blood into the brain, where it binds to the receptors in the hippocampus, amygdala, prefrontal cortex, and other regions"; it does this "sub-symbolically, in codes that are not decipherable consciously."[126] But Connolly's gloss adds something: "Thus the amygdala, an intense little brain nodule… participates in *a system that generates rapid, coarse judgments* in dangerous situations operating *below the capacity of conscious assessment and feeling*."[127] The element Connolly has introduced himself is the generation of judgments without conscious assessment of the

[121]*Neuropolitics*, 33.
[122]See *Neuropolitics*, 34–35.
[123]*Neuropolitics*, 36.
[124]Ibid.
[125]*Neuropolitics*, 76.
[126]*Neuropolitics*, 91.
[127]*Neuropolitics*, 90.

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"situation," which is supposedly cut off "above" the process described by LeDoux. But LeDoux says nothing about this process incapacitating, limiting, or replacing conscious assessment of a situation; he merely says that the subject is not aware of exactly what is happening in his brain. And again, like Damasio, LeDoux does not discuss "affect" at all, or indeed agency. LeDoux is also cited in *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, where Connolly makes heavy use of the "visceral register" of thought, which is, he tells us, "linked by multiple circuits" to the "more refined intellectual register."[128] Again he cites Joseph LeDoux's work on the amygdala.[129] But nowhere in his research does LeDoux claim that there are different "registers" of thought. Connolly actually takes his idea of "registers" from the *other* side of the "conversation" he is hosting, namely from Nietzsche and medieval Christian thought.[130]

These "conversations" that Connolly is staging, then, are changing the conclusions of his scientists by introducing words and concepts that they have not themselves used—above all, *agency*. It is not, however, obvious that agency normally is, or should be, understood in the first place as an entity susceptible of natural-scientific falsification. Words pertaining to agency in philosophy, such as the "will," the "self," the "subject," the "ego," and "responsibility," may be deployed to make sense of something given to individual and social experience in some way—phenomenologically or existentially, perhaps. But it does not follow that they are to be understood as bodies, structures, or forces that are empirically verifiable or falsifiable. I am not arguing that such things should not be referred to, or that they are, as Ayer says, "senseless."[131] Other readers might wish to assess what sort of function these terms have, and on what other grounds they have been legitimately used and might continue to be. Here I intend only to point out that an individual's "agency," "will," and/or "reason" are not something of which Connolly's neuroscientists have proved or disproved the existence or function, or probably even tried to; and that by introducing the agency and reasoning of the individual into these scientists' findings from the other side of this "conversation" with cultural theory, Connolly is actually imposing (as Ruth Leys says) upon neuroscience entities and processes that it does not analyze, and perhaps cannot analyze, in order to proclaim that they are fictitious and must be "rethought." The "evidence" Connolly presents to support the primary prescription of "deep pluralism" is, then, essentially of his own making, which is why it is not surprising that it seems to "resonate" with the philosophers he follows.[132]

[128]*Capitalism*, 70.
[129]*Secularist*, 28–29; see also 36, 40, 181.
[130]*Secularist*, 27.
[131]A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 9.
[132]*Neuropolitics*, 94.

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"Creative Freedom"

As Connolly has turned in recent work to the complexity and "agency" of nonhuman systems, he has begun to discuss the implications of redistributive agency for the political concept of freedom.[133] Connolly rejects "negative" and "positive" freedom because neither, he says, "comes to terms sufficiently with the role of creativity in freedom."[134] By this Connolly means the role of affect within and without the individual, that is, other elements or "forces" entering into processes of desiring, pursuing, planning, and acting. For Connolly, "negative" and "positive" theories of freedom cannot accommodate complexity and affect, so in their stead he offers what he calls "creative freedom."[135] Creative freedom ostensibly corresponds better with the new "complex" account of the individual and world by including forces "below" and "above" the individual. Here is how Connolly illustrates it:

> Creative processes flow through and over us, and reflexivity doubles the creative adventure. Actions are thus not entirely controlled by preexisting intentions; rather the creative dimension helps to compose and refine intentions as they become consolidated in action. To articulate the creative dimension of freedom, then, is to insert a fundamental qualification or hesitation into the ideas of both the masterful agent and agency as the activation of intentions already there. The creative element is located somewhere *between* active and passive agency. When creative freedom is under way in an unsettled context we may find ourselves *allowing or encouraging* a new thought, desire, or strategy to crystallize out of the confusion and nest of proto-thoughts that precede it. An agent, individual or collective, can help to open the portals of creativity, but it cannot will that which is creative to come into being by intending the result before it arrives. Real creativity is thus tinged with uncertainty and mystery.[136]

Connolly's examples concern, first, a basketball player spontaneously creating a new type of shot while "under intense defensive pressure"; the shot catches on and revolutionizes the world of basketball. For Connolly, "Such modes of creative, mutual adjustment, neither simply assignable to one player or coach, nor fitting neatly into extant notions of preformed intention… occur all the time in multiple domains. They form part of the essence of freedom."[137] He then adds examples of "creative innovations" in politics, such as boycotts, antislavery networks, and protests.[138] But what else can we say about "the essence of freedom"? Connolly later adds: "The

[133]*Fragility,* 71–80.
[134]*Fragility,* 74; see also 79.
[135]*Fragility,* 78–79.
[136]*Fragility,* 75; for a note on the "Nietzschean" origin of this side of Connolly's recent work see 174; and also Dumm, "Connolly's Voice," 77.
[137]*Fragility,* 75.
[138]*Fragility,* 77–78.

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spontaneity now flows *through the agents and the open-ended rules of the practice*, for good or ill."[139] He also talks of people being "a vehicle through which something new and noble is brought into the world,"[140] "catalyzing events,"[141] and helping to "usher something new into the world."[142] And later, "Freedom: to be and to become otherwise than we are."[143]

There are lots of ideas here, and Connolly may of course intend to develop his account of "creative freedom" in more detail in future work, so a consciously provisional summary is appropriate. As Connolly has explained it so far, "creative freedom" seems to be (1) an inherently collective phenomenon, (2) realized (even) in the absence of intentions, (3) enjoyed when forces act *through* the individual, or use the individual as a "vehicle," and seems (4) to require the emergence of something "new."

Despite the provisional nature of "creative freedom," some undelayed assessment is deserved: firstly because Connolly is already linking the freedom of "real creativity"[144] with such political activism as he considers to be *urgent*;[145] and secondly because what he says about "creative freedom" throws light on the true failure of his attack on individual agency and reason in political theory, and perhaps also in activism.

In order to assess Connolly's theory of "creative freedom" there are three questions that should be posed. First, what does the individual stand to lose and gain by freedom of this kind that he/she is currently denied? Second, what does the collective stand to lose or gain by it? And third, can it count as a theory of freedom at all—that is, does it satisfy certain criteria that a theory of freedom *as such* should satisfy?

For the individual there are first, Connolly says, "rewards attached to embracing the world as becoming. The vitality of life is experienced actively";[146] the affirmation "enhances our positive sense of attachment to [the] cosmos";[147] we are opened "to modes of experience, feeling and proto-agency in the world that most of us had heretofore missed… new thresholds of human sensitivity are also tapped";[148] "a sense of attunement is attained";[149] we can "allow the sweetness of existence to sink into our pores"[150] and "feel

[139]*Fragility*, 76.
[140]*World*, 75.
[141]*Fragility*, 145.
[142]*World*, 75; see also 27.
[143]*Fragility*, 79.
[144]*World*, 21; see also 27; and *Fragility*, 160, 163, 167.
[145]*World*, 41, 58, 91; *Fragility*, 71–72.
[146]*World*, 113.
[147]*Fragility*, 148.
[148]*World*, 28.
[149]*Fragility*, 146.
[150]*Fragility*, 181; see also 46.

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tremors of gratitude for existence itself."[151] These "rewards" seem to apply to what Connolly calls "the visceral register" (feelings), and in the cases of many individuals what he describes would be true: people do indeed commonly report that being part of something, such as a "good cause," makes them *feel* alive and that they have a place in the world and a part to play; it makes them *feel* "in tune," "at peace," "harmonized," and (put simply) *happy*. All of this might certainly be part of what it means to "feel free." Connolly's creative freedom may, then, retain the freedom *felt* by being part of collective action.

For the individual, second, creative freedom offers freedom *from* responsibility in certain of its burdensome manifestations.[152] As the Stoics recognized, softening one's resistance to one's surroundings—to forces physical, social, ideological—would seem to be less arduous than maintaining or even escalating resistance to them. But what Connolly has in mind is that, thinking, speaking, and acting as part of something larger and/or more complex, individuals are less exposed to attack, blame, and condemnation for the words and actions for which they would previously, "traditionally," have been expected to accept full responsibility, sometimes perhaps unfairly.[153]

But by the same move, the individual also stands to lose quite a lot in Connolly's new philosophy. For Connolly, individual responsibility is falsified when individual agents "are themselves composed of several micro-agents";[154] when the will is "divided against itself";[155] when "the 'you' refers to intra-individual, micro- and macro-assemblages of desire";[156] when I (like you) "become plural."[157] Connolly does not intend, I think, to cancel *all* responsibility for the individual; the individual is still supposed to be a "force" in the complex.[158] But this account of what makes up an individual surely applies *all the time*. By being evasive on the question of what is *not* taken away from individual responsibility[159] and/or *when*—by saying that the agency and responsibility of the individual are to "give considerable ground,"[160] to be "loosened"[161] and "redistributed," without anywhere explicating what is to be left intact—nothing concrete seems to have been guaranteed *for* the individual, or *of* the individual. I mean to indicate two distinct but

[151]*Fragility*, 181.
[152]See *Ethos*, 49–62; and *Fragility*, 135.
[153]*Ethos*, 49–62.
[154]*World*, 27.
[155]*World*, 22, 82.
[156]*World*, 123; see also 97.
[157]"Becoming Plural" was the title of a 2007 conference on Connolly's political thought hosted by the Department of Politics and International Relations at Swansea University, UK. See *Political Theory* 35, no. 2 (2007): 239.
[158]See *Fragility*, 135.
[159]See *World*, 21–22, 25.
[160]*Fragility*, 145.
[161]*World*, 29.

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related "losses" by this. First, as everyone and everything is "affected" in some way at all times, it seems that there can be no situations in which individual responsibility must still be accepted. Certainly Connolly does not suggest any. But just as individuals can never be held solely responsible for their mistakes, so their achievements can never be their "own," they can never "deserve" anything. That is the first loss.

The second concerns the right to think of oneself not only as an "independent" thinker or actor, but also as "the same person." Connolly's politics of complexity insists on the plurality of a person, on the ever-new composition of the "assemblage," and on the constant interruption this offers to narratives of fixed identity. Because of the binary categories into which he forces everything—single and fixed (false and resentful), or plural and becoming (true and affirmatory)—Connolly has nothing to say about the continuity of an individual's identity *through* or *in* becoming. Connolly's politics of complexity, then, by attacking the permanence and ignoring the continuity of a person's identity, seems to entail the loss of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls "the unity of a human life."[162] Wyndham Lewis, writing in the 1920s, and noting the effect of this quirk of "Bergsonism" generally for the individual, describes what is left:

> What you pay for the pantheistic immanent oneness of "creative," "evolutionary" substance, into which you are invited to merge, is that you become a phalanstery of selves. The old objection to any pantheism, that it banishes individuality and is not good for the self, comes out more strongly than ever in the teaching of "space-time." So… it becomes more and more evident that, although it is by no means clear that you gain anything (except a great many fine phrases and exalted, mystical assurances of "cosmic" advantages), it is very clear what you *lose*.[163]

This brings us to the social cost of Connolly's politics of complexity. We have seen that "creative freedom" involves the kind of freedom that individuals might feel when they have successfully redistributed blame for their thoughts, words, and movements—whether that responsibility has been passed on to their biology, their sociopolitical context, or to other people.[164] It might however be argued that this is not a good thing; that trust and peaceful social relations rely on individuals' narrative unity and upon people being discouraged from denying responsibility whenever it might suit them. For Lewis, again, "constantly encouraged to regard himself as a mass of Hydes and Jekylls," an individual "throws all his useful obligations to the winds";

[162]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 204–25.

[163]Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 166–67.

[164]See Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1989), 130.

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and these obligations, he adds, are "useful to each and all of us, for it is upon the 'behaviourism' inbred in our neighbour, of moral and unselfish precept, that our personal comfort and peace depend."[165] So if the individual's inherent plurality is allowed to affect the concept of responsibility itself, as Connolly has long thought it must,[166] then what seems at risk is any obligation "I" have to honor obligations that "I" acquired at some past time, whether by promises made or by advantages previously received, when I was a different assemblage. Connolly envisages his activists adopting a general attitude of disobedience.[167] But it is upon certain obligations that we put on one another—holding each other to account by ascribing what Hannah Arendt calls the ability of individuals to make and keep promises—that the peace and comfort of all of us depends, as Lewis points out, including the most disadvantaged among us. Connolly's "creative freedom," and the "becoming plural" that attends it, seems to return us to the very situation that Hobbes recognizes as the condition which must be overcome for social life to exist at all: the condition in which the plurality of sovereign selves makes trust impossible.[168] The exact nature of the problem is of course different, but the solution can be summarized in the same way: the "many" must in some sense be made and maintained as a "one"; the deliquescence of this "one" cannot serve as a platform for the solution of social and political problems. Connolly's deep pluralization of the individual seems to be a solvent, rather than a coagulator; a catalyst for the dissolution of the social fabric, unpromising for the reassembly of it.

Finally I have doubts that "creative freedom" as Connolly has hitherto explained it can even function as a basic theory of freedom at all. Campaigning for creative freedom would not seem to be about winning rights or opportunities for people to do or say things that were previously forbidden or unobtainable for them. Neither does it seem to be a kind of freedom that a government could be upbraided for repressing. Certainly it does not seem to be the kind of freedom that "militant" political activism is ordinarily intended to secure. These are perhaps mundane criteria for an account of freedom, but it seems essential that we could at least identify from a theory of freedom when, where, and how that freedom was being withheld. With Connolly's creative freedom we cannot do this. If individuals inhabit biologically and culturally complex bodies and are inextricably involved in collective processes which affect them, which are affected by them, and which happen *through* them to the realization of something "new," then they *are* "creatively free" already, on Connolly's account of freedom. That process is,

[165]Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 341.
[166]See *Ethos*, 49–62.
[167]*Fragility*, 182–89.
[168]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 111.

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for him, the pattern of the universe. "Freedom," then, is conceptually superfluous.

But worse, because creative freedom actually applies everywhere all the time, Connolly accidentally offers a vocabulary for describing any (political) activity as "free" and "creative." This might apply to the sorts of movements Connolly calls "noble," of course, but it would be equally serviceable to the kind of organizations, regimes, and movements that Connolly might want to say compromise or impede freedom: morally ambiguous, exploitative, resource-depleting corporations, for example, or supremacist groups of various kinds—all of which, consistent with the biological imagery Connolly favors, organize, sustain, and reproduce themselves, evolve by adapting to their environments, affect and are in turn affected by self-organizing systems above and below the levels of their own operation, generate unpredictable novelties, often without or despite intentions, and rely on members allowing forces to "flow through" them. On Connolly's account, people involved in such activities could rightfully claim to be "free" and to have "freedom" on their side.

The Intellect

So far we have been assessing Connolly's problematization of individual agency. But there is also good reason to be cautious about his correlative attempt to problematize "deliberation." Connolly wants to highlight "the insufficiency of what might be called intellectualist and deliberationist 'models' of thinking that retain so much credibility in philosophy and the human sciences."[169] "Today many cultural and political theorists act as if ethics and politics do, could, or should consist of deliberation alone," he says.[170] Connolly associates such models of "deliberation" particularly with Kant, and therefore with "transcendence,"[171] which he understands as the error of positing an "outside view," a perspective transcending the cut and thrust of real processes of becoming.[172] Connolly, calling his position "immanent naturalism,"[173] argues that there is in fact no such outside perspective: various sources of affect are always interrupting or disturbing intellectual processes,[174] applying "pressures" to them,[175] often subliminally, or from "below" consciousness,[176]

[169]*Neuropolitics*, 10, 36, 59.
[170]*Neuropolitics*, 17; see also 21, 66.
[171]*Neuropolitics*, 94; see also *World*, 31, 39–40, 64; and *Fragility*, 99–120.
[172]*World*, 31.
[173]*World*, 39.
[174]*Neuropolitics*, 10, 23, 77, 94.
[175]*Ethos*, 65–74; *World*, 4, 46–51, 55.
[176]*Neuropolitics*, 20, 13, 65, 98; *World*, 54, 64; *Fragility*, 86.

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or *faster than* consciousness;[177] or, the things we try to conceptualize "elude" or "exceed" consciousness.[178] It is clear, then, that Connolly is not really attacking intellectualism—the idea that only deliberation counts—but the validity of unaffected thinking *as such*.

The question we are all the time dealing with, the reader may recall, is not whether we live in a world of becoming, but whether it can be held that there is anything "*besides*, behind, or over and above the flux" (Lewis's phrasing)—or, as I have said, anything *exempt* from becoming. Something which might still be considered exempt or different in some important sense from the world of becoming is what these "intellectual" processes that Connolly targets—knowledge, self-awareness, and mastery[179]—have in common: namely, *reasoning*.

Reasoning is of course itself a process, so it "becomes" in a very obvious sense, but not in such a way that it is falsified by the processes Connolly describes. By "reasoning" or (following Connolly) "deliberation" I intend nothing more "transcendent" than what is so neatly described by R. G. Collingwood: "thinking one thing, x, because you think another thing, y; where y is your 'reason' or, as it is sometimes called, your 'ground' for thinking x."[180] We reason in this sense when we are trying to decide and/or plan things.[181] Connolly thinks "traditional" images of reasoning presuppose either (1) that neurological processes are "insulated" from other processes, or (2) the existence of a "transcendent plane," removed from the physical world, upon which reasoning happens.[182] But it is not obvious that either assumption is invoked by the basic account of reasoning just given. Indeed, even the most stubborn rationalist can agree that people's judgments often prove infuriatingly susceptible to all sorts of irrational "forces," and that neurodegenerative diseases impair sufferers' ability to reason well. But Connolly gives no reason not to add to that agreement what the rationalist would always want to add: namely, that there is nevertheless a difference between a *good reason* for thinking x, and a *pressure* to conclude x; and that intellectual processes can and should distinguish reasons from pressures. Someone who asserts x justifies it by explaining their reasoning, after all, not the complex brain processes in them of which the conclusion was an emergent novelty.[183] We talk about someone's reasoning "going wrong" because of such pressures, or being led astray, or even being corrupted. So it is possible

[177]*Neuropolitics*, 27, 83.
[178]*Neuropolitics*, 58; *World*, 6.
[179]*Fragility*, 77; see also 39.
[180]Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 99.
[181]Connolly in fact mentions the individual's capacity to "decide" in passing. His discussion of what this involves, however, is relegated to an endnote, and deflects the question: see *World*, 26, 182n12.
[182]*World*, 148.
[183]See *World*, 23.

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to acknowledge the processes of the physical world, including within the brain, but also to think that existing accounts of intellectual processes remain unaffected, without making either of the assumptions Connolly targets.

Finally, there is a considerable irony to Connolly's problematization of reason, for he continues (very often *while* carrying out that project) to promote, as in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, carefully thought-through policies on commuting and travel, health care, food supply and diet, power and waste, green efficiency, education, and even mortgages.[184] Similarly, what he calls "critical responsiveness"—subtly "moving" the relations that comprise a given identity in order to prevent it from being settled in a certain way[185]—would seem to rely on careful analysis of a situation and a well-planned response. Whether the reader considers such political thinking to be theorizing, policy forming, or both, it seems to involve the very intellectual processes Connolly is calling into question. The process he thinks should replace the now-refuted intellect also seems no different from what he elsewhere attacks as the resentful force of "teleological finalism"[186]—the force that allegedly drives the attempts of political elites to organize people.[187] Here is how Connolly describes his supposedly affirmative alternative: "You first try to *imagine* an interim future in which substantial progress has been made on both fronts within capitalism, broadly defined. … You then work back from that point to specific reforms that could actualize the image."[188] The usual name for that intellectual process is "planning": good planning where sound reasoning and predictions are involved, poor planning where they are not.

It seems to me that Connolly's attempt to denigrate the intellect is not only poorly evidenced but also to be regretted, and that political theorists—as thinkers themselves and presumably as advocates of clear thinking where possible—ought to be alert to this side of his recent writings. On the level of the populace, Connolly is implying (again, always choosing his words carefully) that humans can and should self-organize almost instinctively, without "intellectual" forces repressing their immanent natural processes.[189] But how about on the level of environmental politics? Connolly is certainly concerned about man's relationship with the natural environment, and heavily critical of past and continuing (mis)management of natural resources and ecosystems. But on this level Connolly's attack on the intellect would appear to exacerbate the problem. Abandoning intellectual *knowledge*, individual *responsibility*, and the desire to *control* where the environment is concerned would seem to entail

[184]*Capitalism*, 105–8.
[185]See *Ethos*, xv–xix.
[186]*Fragility*, 179.
[187]*Fragility*, 39.
[188]*Capitalism*, 94.
[189]See *World*, 15.

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treating with suspicion, or even abandoning, our attempts to *understand* how the natural world works and how human activity affects it; it appears to entail passing on (some) *responsibility* for one's own actions and behaviors, both as individual consumers and as shareholders in advanced economies; and it seems to entail giving up on solving environmental problems in a spirit of trying to *control* things. Ostensibly intended to fuel environmentalism, Connolly's advice actually fits very uneasily with some of the basic assumptions of the majority of environmental scientists and campaigners, namely (1) that we are better off knowing more and not less about how human activity affects the natural environment; (2) that we need individuals to take responsibility; and (3) that we should act in order to effect desired results, rather than wait for other parties to move first or, worse, for ecosystems to right themselves. Again then, it is clear what is to be lost in Connolly's program, but much less clear what is to be gained.

Conclusions

According to William E. Connolly, advocates of the politics of becoming are a "growing contingent."[190] If this is true, it can largely be attributed to the apparent resonance of the politics of becoming with both new science and radical activist political theory. Connolly claims ample support for his metaphysical rejection of individual agency and thinking from the cutting edge of physical science, which he thinks is increasingly confirming the old speculations of Bergson, William James, and Nietzsche. But in fact what he presents is not the scientific evidence that he says it is. His selections are unreliable and unrepresentative, and his interpretations are unwarranted and unscientific. The "conversations" into which he places the scientists he uses, which ostensibly fill lacunae with insights from other perspectives, in fact misrepresent their conclusions, mostly by introducing entities that they were never dealing with in the first place, and probably would not attempt to.

The implications of Connolly's attack on the agency and reasoning of the individual are also a little worrying, not least those pertaining to freedom. His reworking of freedom, "creative freedom," promises positive feelings, but concretely offers nothing that people cannot already enjoy other than some unspecified degree of liberation from being blamed. What "creative freedom" denies the individual outweighs these anyway questionable benefits: the right to deserve credit for individual achievements, and the narrative unity of a human life in and through its development. The social impact of "creative freedom" is also troubling. The pluralization of the individual seems to undermine obligations in general, with incalculable consequences for any collective. "Creative freedom" also fails a basic test for any theory

[190]*World*, 8. For specific names see Connolly's "Acknowledgments" sections: *World*, 178–79; *Fragility*, 197–99.

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of freedom: it makes nonsense of liberation because, in its chief features, "creative freedom" describes the same process that is on Connolly's account going on everywhere anyway. But worse, because nothing seems to be excluded by "creative freedom," it might be deployed to legitimate and celebrate processes and regimes which could not so easily be reconciled to other, more discriminating accounts of freedom.

Finally, Connolly seems to be making his considerable academic weight serviceable to a cause hostile not (only) to intellectual*ism*, but to the intellect itself in its most essential function: the distinguishing of good reasons from bad reasons and from unconscious processes or "pressures." The practical effect of Connolly's antideliberation program for global politics would actually be detrimental to any human activity that depended on the responsibility and obligations of the individual, including any activity that might have sought to repair damage done to ecosystems. If William E. Connolly, apparently the fourth most influential scholar in political theory in the last twenty years, is right about this "growing contingent," then we cannot any longer afford to neglect these and other fundamental weaknesses of "the politics of complexity."

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