Automaticity and the Sentimental Empiricism of William E. Connolly

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About a year ago, a minor viral moment happened online when some grad students and early career scholars began posting pictures of books, they had bought from an online used book seller. Upon scrolling, I recognized the sinewy calligraphy etched into the margins immedi- ately. The books were part of William Connolly's library that he had thinned out as one does periodically. One of those who posted these pictures, Stephen Cucharo, was assistant editor of the journal Political Theory. The title of the book or its content mattered very little to me. The graphic design of the marginalia, however, was unmistakable and matches up with Connolly's own account of reading and thinking: "You underline passages in a text while reading, and then outline the text you have just underlined, remembering as you do how close the relationship is between hand gesture and brain processes."[1]

In the following I discuss the close relationship between hand and brain as Connolly describes it and as I understand it: That relation has no presumption of either necessity or purpose; indeed, it is automatic. One of the most important lessons one can draw from Connolly's work is that a deep pluralism and an ethos of critical generosity asks us to come to terms with the non-determination (or, if you prefer, the non-necessity) between a relation and the terms related. To stay with Neuropolitics, we find this intuition in Connolly's claim that things relate not out of necessity, but out of the "choreographed mixtures" of interstitial media.[2]

The development of this intuition and the ripple effects it procures is bookended by The Augustinian Imperative (1993) and Neuropolitics (2002). This is the period in which Connolly seemed most engaged with the enterprise of American political theory and its unique inability to deal with the world because of what I would call its Cold War obsti- nacy in deriving the legitimacy conditions of an ideal moral universe. Call this the American exceptionalism of postwar political theory in the United States, or its universal moralism.

One need not rehearse the full force of that critical intervention because it is all too familiar. That said, what we see developing in Connolly's work is an insistence on showing how the political ontology of a transcendental moral universe (whether Augustinian or Kantian or Christian capitalist) betrays an anti-pluralist disposition (that today we may call an aspirational authoritarianism) towards the relationality of terms, entities, and constituencies; that is, an anti-pluralist disposi- tion to the very fact of

democratic partaking. Connolly's intervention is to show that the Christian, liberal urge to derive intention from causes is misguided precisely because there is no evident or even verifiable associational force like identity that operates as a natural relation to guarantee the principled outcome of a causal derivation in all possible instances of said relation.

Let me unpack how I understand this thesis From the Augustinian Imperative onwards, and including his reflec- tions on cinema in Neuropolitics, and then his equally formidable (in recent years) attention to the Anthropocene and its political ontology, Connolly considers automaticity as part of the immanent naturalism of political life. The history of political thought, from the ancients to the moderns, and certainly from the 1950s onward in the United States, betrayed a disdain for a world without a derivable purpose, a world that is at once automatic (i.e., the amygdala) and immediate (i.e., perception). From his engagement with an Augustinian moral universe, to his elaboration of an ethos of critical generosity and, finally, to his confrontation with cinema and climate, Connolly unfolds the intuition that a disposition of deep pluralism cannot assume that human agency is exclusively intentional and that the only account we can give of political action is a human one (or even one derived from the presuppositions of human consciousness as the root of agential intention).

As we know, for Augustine free will exists because if not, god is the source of evil; to conclude otherwise is heresy. Augustine absolves god for having created evil by defining evil as the human turn away from god. We can see this throughout The Confessions where the formal structure of the text's emplotment guarantees reconciliation and salva- tion from our wretched state. Simply put, the conflict of the inner citadel between the human willingness to turn to god, and the equally available human willingness to turn away from god, is the source of freedom and morality and therefore evil.

Connolly addressed this as a fundamental premise of the Western history of political thought and began derailing that premise with his attentions to Nietzsche, of course, but also through his readings of Job and Job's struggle to accept a divinely ordained moral universe. Connolly's Job acquiesces to the possibility of a sacred universe; but a divinely ordained one, likely not; equally unlikely is a political ontology of causal necessity and fixed relations that provides logical derivations as legitimate motivations for moral action. Connolly's reading of Job flirts with the indetermination of automaticity; with 20/20 hindsight I read Connolly's Job as a precursor to his thinking of and about the amygdala, cinema, and climate—all of which are figures of automaticity in his thinking. In all these cases we have exemplary moments when the political theory of humans must confront some- thing that Aristotle's foundational reflections on politics have denied us: That both beasts and gods are political. In short, political theory must face up to a political ontology of resonant machines.

Recounting his own intellectual development, Connolly affirms that by the time of Neuropolitics he had become fully immersed in Deleuze's (and Guattari's) intellectual experiments in philosophy. In his encounter with

Deleuze, Connolly discovered himself an empiri- cist (this is my attribution, not his). But this is not the empiricism of behavioral political science. What I'm speaking of is a sentimental empiricism that does not forget three fundamental insights (which I find first and foremost in Hume but that are also available in William James, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Connolly's work): 1) relations are not determined by the things they relate. This means that any association (or adjacency, or assemblage) is emergent and unsettled; 2) if relations are not fixed, this means that beliefs are revisable, and they are revisable because our world advenes upon our bodies differently at different times, providing new and divergent experiences. This was the whole point of the empiricist's turn to experimentation, which is often forgotten by the scientistic account of empiricism. Experiments don't provide results: They provide us with experiences that compel us to edit or revise our beliefs.[3] The unwillingness to revise one's beliefs is, I would add, the dispositional mode at the core of today's (though not just today's) aspirational fascism. Finally, 3) the empiricism that Connolly draws from is one that isn't just attentive to a body's identity but is aware that action (including moral or political action) is move- ment, and that the major source of movement is not our soul but our bodies, or what Connolly calls the visceral register.

In other words, human action and movement exist in the world not because of intention, but because bodily sentiments (or what today we call affects) move us about in the world. These sentiments are not emotions or feelings, easily identifiable and definable as having a purview of influence and intention; they are forces of traction, attrac- tion, and detraction that emulsify bodies, events, thoughts, urges, policies, technologies, and so forth. As I have come to understand and build upon Connolly's work, part of what is at stake in his articulation of immanent naturalism's dissenting opinion to either the naturalist minority report or to the transcendentalist majoritarian position is a rethinking and reworking of the automatic in nature and in ourselves. When in Neuropolitics Connolly asserts that immanent naturalists reject the command model of judgment and the teleological order of neces- sity, he points us to discover how in the modern tradition of empiricism the problem isn't skepticism but the automaticity of the senti- ments disposing the adjacencies and distortions of bodily relations.

Sentimental empiricism is an orientation attentive to the body's experience of and with automaticity, and to the ways that the imagina- tion adjoins said experiences as assemblages of emplotment, or what David Hume called fictions—which are not falsities, but refer instead to the ways in which the imagination (a resonant machine for Hume if ever there was one) arranges experiences as adjoined impressions.

In Neuropolitics Connolly discovers this insight through cinema. More precisely, he turns to neuroscience and cinema to argue that as political theorists we have an ill-conceived moral theory of mind. Indeed, the problem is that we only have a moral theory of mind that requires a transcendental field to order the innate relations between experience, knowledge, and mental faculties. An immanent naturalist theory of mind—or better, an immanent

naturalist account of thinking—begins with the sentiments as forces of association in a world where the fact of relationality—that fact that bodies participate in forging adjacencies—is not rooted in the fixed nature of substances. Form and matter, husband and wife, parent and child, gender and desire—none of these relations are causal necessities. Pace Aristotle, politics does not begin with the family nor, for that matter, with the human; indeed, it does not begin with the principle of natural relations.

Hence cinema. And specifically (for Connolly) Deleuze's account of cinema, indebted as it is to the technical experimentations of the French New Wave auteurs, all of whom were explicit in their departure from the conventions of Aristotelian narrative and teleology. When Truffaut wrote his famous denunciation of prewar French film, and when Godard first assembled the jump cut sequences from Breathless (after himself penning a revolutionary account of montage in the pages of Cahier du Cinema) the site of attack was a neoclassical commitment—perpetuated throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French education system—to Aristotelian poetics, and specifically to Aristotle's account of emplotment as the quintessence of the unity of matter and substance—that is, the quintessence of Being. What cinema did for Godard, Truffaut, and then Deleuze is make available the paucity of a way of thinking about art that refused to consider the tech- niques of composition (instead of just transmission) as participants of a medium.

We know now that this was aided by Gilbert Simondon's foun- dational work on technical objects, which completely disabuses us from thinking about a technical medium as an Aristotelian substance. A technical object, Simondon taught his readers in the 1950s, is not a thing (as is the case in what he gestures towards as Heidegger's "facile humanism" in The Question Concerning Technology); a technical object is always "more than one" because it emerges from an associated milieu of metastability.[4] Cinema is neither camera, nor shot, nor cut, nor moviola machine, nor screen, nor gaze, nor plot; it is a process of phasing and dephasing of all these elements, and so many more. This is what deep pluralism means to these thinkers and to the tradition of sentimental empiricism more generally.

Between The Augustinian Imperative and Neuropolitics, Connolly gives us a sinewy set of marginalia that assay a distancing of polit- ical theory from its moral image of thought. The result is a sustained and indefatigable engagement with the fact of automaticity as an ines- capable condition of political—and human—life. Since this period, Connolly's commitment to automaticity as political ontology (again, what he calls resonant machines) has expanded beyond cinema and neuroscience to encompass climate change and aspirational fascism. The phasings and dephasing of these technical dispositifs continue to foment a disappointed hope in the clumsiness of an anthropocentric mode of political theorizing that holds out for an eschatological rapture where humanity or god will save the world from suffering and violence. One is permitted to be wary and weary of such a hope and such an outcome. It remains too ensconced in a transcendental image of thought unwilling to face up to the fact that a political community involves

many more elemental media than the sum total of its human participants and their intentions or wills. That said, I am hopeful that Connolly's work will continue to provide the license to think other- wise to generations of political theorists to come.

NOTES

1. William E. Connolly, Resounding Events: Adventures of an Academic from the Working Class (Fordham University Press, 2022), 123.
2. William E. Connolly, Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 21–22.
3. Davide Panagia, Sentimental Empiricism: Politics, Philosophy, and Criticism in Postwar France (Fordham University Press, 2024), 1–19.
4. Gilbert Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects (Univocal Publishing LLC, 2016), 15.