

Pluralistic Sense-Making: *A World of Becoming*, by William E. Connolly, Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 2011

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Since its origins in the European spirit of the Renaissance, modern philosophy has oscillated between its metaphysical desire for pure knowledge and its acknowledgment of what Connolly calls the 'urgency of today' (p. 41), the everyday demands for action which cannot afford to wait for pure knowledge. For many, this division is heuristic more than it is real, and therefore, it is a chronological problem of foundations and consequences before it is a conflict of priorities.

It is therefore natural that our post-modern disillusionment with the optimism of modernity translates into the acute awareness that in the grand improvisation of history and of the history of thought, placing one priority after the other in time almost fatally amounts to choosing the first and giving up on the second: the promise of a time where knowledge can offer practical guidance has been broken. As a result most practical philosophy and ethics have turned out to spring out of metaphysics itself, while ethical research has receded into the abstract domain once attributed to the search for knowledge. Of course, there is something artificial in this schematic division between pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity, and even Descartes was aware of the problem described here as postmodern: for him already, the problem of deferring the application of some ethical imperative to an abstract *later*, that is to say, to the time when ethical imperatives were appropriately *discovered*, could not be construed as a morally neutral act. Instead, it had direct consequences on our present behavior. His response, which he called his 'provisional morals,' was an ironic poke at the high-mindedness of those among his colleagues who engaged in endless disputes about moral principles: Descartes pointed out that such concern for principles relied on the hypocritical assumption that it was for the epistemologist to keep the house

from burning while the ethicists were discussing morals in the next room, having left the fire on. The uncertainty that Descartes shared with his colleagues could lead to a paralysis, which in a truly solipsistic world—and only in a solipsistic world—would be neutral. Descartes' reaction, of course, was to point out that whether we know if it exists or not, the world is still there to be taken care of, a moral cogito affirming that the necessity for action was not based on the understanding of the world, but vice versa.

Descartes' ironic swipe at ethical hesitancy and non-commitment arguably remains the best practical theory our philosophy is able to offer. Yet, there is an ocean between the 'best we have' and a satisfactory theory: Descartes' model is based on the assumption that a moral subject—that is to say, a mind—makes his own decision disconnected from the world that surrounds him. Indeed, morals are for Descartes a matter of getting through one's own life, they are not for sharing or interacting, but for coping. We are, he says, like a lone hiker stranded in an unknown forest. For us, inaction is not an option, but neither is action based on the knowledge of where to go. Instead, we must act in full knowledge that our action may be mistaken. Provisional morals is therefore based on a calculus of probabilities: what we must do is firmly walk in a straight line, no matter in which direction, for all things being equal (which, in our uncertainty, they appear to be), the only mistake would be hesitation.

Post-modernity possesses an edge over Descartes: not only has it become obvious *a posteriori* that waiting for ethical knowledge was too risky (something Descartes understood *a priori*), we are now also aware that all individual actions take place within a global web of causes and consequences that go far beyond the individual time, place, and intention of our action. Our interconnected world indeed, keeps forcing us to consider issues involving subconscious generalizations, miscommunications, games of sums and wholes where macro and micro levels of action (and therefore of value) collide incessantly, and uncontrollably and where its individualistic grounding makes any Cartesian morals of provision obsolete. As a result, the imperative to devise the course and the value of our lives and our actions

from within the uncertain condition which we call postmodern, has made a return in the writings of postmodern ethicists from Arendt to Charles Taylor.

In this context, William Connolly's most recent book entitled *A World of Becoming*, is a worthy stab at the renewed conundrum. It takes as its starting point the traditional transcription of the moral problem of freedom into the ontological problem of causality to show that indeed, as we live in a world where such oppositions fail, freedom is never pure, and neither is causality; that events are created by agents *and* by pre-existing states of affairs, and that consequently, inaction, although based upon the desire for informed choice, is a form of "existential resentment." This "resentment," Connolly argues, is never neutral, rather, it should be seen as just another, inauthentic way of engaging with external states of affairs (p. 13 ff.). In short, we live in a world of becoming where, *wollens nollens*, we contribute to the emergence of new states of affairs, an impatient world that we co-create constantly and which in return forces us to march to its own rhythm.

The project of this book, and, according to Connolly, the project of our postmodern world as a whole, is therefore to come to a sort of ambiguous awareness of our inability to ground our actions into ethical or metaphysical certainty, while providing enough knowledge to make the first and essential step, a step which consists in accepting to act nonetheless.

The first chapter of *A World of Becoming*, entitled "Complexity, Agency and Time," mobilizes the truly fascinating thinking of chemist Ilya Prigogine (a long-time interest of Connolly's) in connection to a welcome inclusion of some of the most provocative thoughts of Alfred North Whitehead in order to propose an immanent view of the world in which agency may be seen as neither absolute nor absolutely "closed," indicating that a truly consequent way to view our action would be in terms of "degrees of agency." This leads Connolly to question the opposition of "individualism and holism" on the basis that our actions should legitimately be regarded as our own while it should be acknowledged that their value cannot be detached from the rest of the unified world in which they take place and within which their ripples become partly responsible for some Whiteheadian chaotic

emergence of events (p. 39). As a result, what should be called for is a form of transcendence that does not oppose immanence as much as it “amplifies” it through the awareness of the invisible presence of the general in the local. This generality should be conceived (in a somewhat Merleau-Pontean fashion) as the reverse side brought about by an “intensification of everyday experience” (p. 39) of the place of our action within the whole.

This effort to overcome the opposition of immanence and transcendence leads to the next chapter, entitled “The Vicissitudes of Experience” in which immanence becomes defined as “a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power,” making it possible to find transcendence within immanence because it contends that “there is more to reality than actuality” (p. 43). Quite rightly in this context, Connolly summons up the figures of Merleau-Ponty and of Deleuze and Guattari, and devotes particular (if implicit) attention to what has been recently characterized as Merleau-Ponty’s description of a “metastable” universe made of fluctuating concentrations of forces productive of history (e. g. Beistegui, 2005). The introduction of Merleau-Ponty as a figure that operates the connection between history and perception as creative of events is of course most relevant, and allows Connolly to introduce an interesting discussion of the “micropolitics of perception.” This politics, which relies on what Merleau-Ponty would call some “perceptual faith,” are truly the politics of the lie. For Connolly, the blatant dishonesty of the so-called “news” organization of Fox News is a strong example of the difference between *believing* a claim to be true (which many Fox News viewers do not) and a phenomenon that with Merleau-Ponty again, one may call “thinking according to” the claims presented to us (which the same viewers often do) in a way reminiscent of how, for Merleau-Ponty, perceiving means sharing a mode of being with the “object” of our perception. Of course, the problem contained in this structure of existence, whereby the self is always already directed towards the outside world is the impression of *lack* that results for the post-modern self plunged into a world where reality has become optional. Therefore Connolly suggests that this preexisting intentional structure of existence becomes converted into a constant call for choice. We are now required to choose the reality that we

shall deal with as if it were *the* reality. To Connolly, this phenomenon has two major consequences whose balance needs to be maintained. The first is what he calls the “*minoritization of the world*” (p. 59). This phenomenon is characterized by a proliferation of ever-smaller constituencies individuated according to the fundamental choice of reality they are committed to. In good pluralistic fashion, Connolly recognizes the second consequence of this choice we are facing as the renewed and reinvigorated awareness that such choices are not necessary, and therefore, that they cannot, if properly understood, lead to any form of hegemonic or even prescriptive worldview.

Once the new form of belief (albeit one based on a reality that surges from within a personal wager) is put into place, Connolly undertakes a closer examination of the way the dissolution of hegemonic truth-claims and the identification of small groups determined by an existential wager can be negotiated whilst maintaining these two, potentially antagonistic, aspects alive.

Indeed, chapter 3, entitled “Belief, Spirituality and Time,” presents Connolly’s quest for the establishment of some sort of “soft” certitude whose efficacy would render it fit to face the “urgency of today” while remaining sufficiently aware of its own idiosyncratic nature to allow for competing claims to make themselves heard. Again, a key aspect of Connolly’s suggestion is that a world of becoming includes transcendence within itself, that is to say within immanence, and—this is the main contribution of this chapter—this means that this transcendence can no longer be used to support any political power, since it is merely an elusive and passing transcendence. This allows him to claim: “in my view, there is an outside of immanence, but it does not translate into divinity,” and more precisely, if paradoxically: “there is a dimension, let’s call it ‘the immanence of transcendence’” (p. 75). What this allows for, in Connolly’s opinion, is the generalization of “noble relations of agonistic respect” (p. 77). In Nietzschean fashion, Connolly defines this nobility as a competition where both agents oppose each other only insofar as their own identity (determined by existential choices for Connolly) demands that their mutual difference be acted out, but without turning into a fight to death because one’s identity relies on an existential commitment to certain beliefs that is non-

absolute. The rest of the chapter is therefore devoted to examining under which conditions this balance may be maintained and whether the current state of the world exhibits such agonistic behaviors or rather collapses into its most natural—if most unacceptable— distortion: death conflicts. Connolly therefore asks whether existing “creeds” can be understood as such “existential spiritualities” (p. 83). The obvious fact that they do not, as it now stands, exhibit this agonistic mode of existing is therefore acknowledged readily, leading into the question of the ways in which the “risks” of some hegemonic abuse of the agonistic structure in our polities may be “negotiated” (p. 90). This problem is taken to a new level as it becomes apparent that the promotion of agonism runs the “risk” of entering into a truly antagonistic opposition with the ‘bellicose’ antagonism described above (p. 89). This chapter closes with Connolly’s surprisingly candid solution consisting in some sort of proximity preaching whereby moderates would lead moderate lives and moderately advertise them to their neighbors.

This chapter is followed by a brief ‘interlude’ consisting of a highly personal selection of quotations of authors from Heraclitus through Prigogine by way of Nietzsche, Stuart Kauffman, Henry James and many others, whose intended effect—presumably to circumscribe the broad strand of thought into which Connolly wishes to inscribe his book—is far outdone by its actual effect, namely of worsening of the suspicion that this book has a tendency for uncritical imprecision and exaggeratedly intuitive thinking.

The next chapter entitled “The Human Predicament,” offers encounters with several characterizations of “the human predicament” taken from Sophocles, Sankara, Tillich, Keller, and Proust, before finally culminating in the direct treatment of Nietzsche that was left pending since the first pages of the book. For Connolly, the human predicament is the tragic condition whereby the human agency cannot remain idle even as it feels itself to be falling short of achieving its aims. This, Connolly contends rightly, is a direct result of a world of becoming. One of the ways in which we must cope with this condition, he suggests, is to develop our ability for “periodic dwelling” and “creative suspension” as a way to offset the unsettling pace of the becoming of the world (p. 104). In Connolly’s view, Nietzsche’s doctrine of

eternal recurrence is pertinent to this predicament since it makes him “a prophet of time as becoming in a world without god” (p. 110), which becomes understood as a redefinition of the moment in terms of its “fecundity,” that is to say, in line with what was argued in the early chapters, that every true moment in becoming must be regarded as an *event*. The way we should respond to this “urgency of today” reasserted by Connolly lies in what Nietzsche calls “nobility,” a concept, as Connolly rightly points out, that is closely related to the tragic and the Dionysian insofar as this nobility qualifies the “ability to make reflective wagers when the future is uncertain” (pp. 112-113). As a result, Connolly concludes that in spite of their many divergences, all the authors discussed here agree on five counts:

- First, we must reject the strict opposition of authenticity and inauthenticity as it involves the risk to collapse into hegemonic forms of belief.
- Second, they all pose the deeply relevant question of “whether it is riskier to fend off [worryingly hegemonic] experiences in science, politics, theology, film, ethics, media, art and everyday life, or to engage them affirmatively” (p. 120-121).
- Third, the human predicament is necessarily intertwined with the question of desire.
- Fourth, we must face the human predicament in some broadly (un)defined “affirmative” attitude.
- Finally, we need a politically ambiguous use of induction (with consequences that would allegedly make the likes of Habermas, Foucault, Strauss, and even Kant fret).

As a result, Connolly admits—reluctantly at this point—that the only acceptable attitude is some form of relativism based on mere “preferences” between the available descriptions of the human predicament (p. 122). Commitment to one of these descriptions, Connolly claims, must be matched with “a presumption of

agonistic respect for other readings,” which is supposed to prevent us from collapsing into “*ressentiment*” (p. 123).

The question of *ressentiment* is pursued in the next chapter, “Capital Flows, Sovereign Decisions, and World Resonance Machines.” Beginning with Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, and his identification of the real with the rational, Connolly follows what he perceives as a shift in Hegel’s worldview, leading into the recognition that there is “creative energy” in “those stubborn elements of surplus, messiness and loose energy circulating through culture” (p. 127) and such elements amount to the recognition of some “radical immanence.” (*Ibid.*) This constitutes a threat to Hegel’s cherished stability of the state, making the world we inhabit unpredictable, and turning it into a globalized world that presents itself as an “abstract machine” in which none of its parts is susceptible to recognize itself. The obvious risk involved in this is that it may lead us into *ressentiment*, this paramount expression of powerlessness one feels before anonymous powers. The solution, of course, cannot lie in any dreamed hegemony, since sovereignty has become only one of the determining structures of our political life, in competition with other “interstate and global dimensions.” (p. 131).

Facing the question of the anonymity of power, Connolly contends that we may respond to it by enhancing the remnants of personalism lying in ancient concepts of sovereignty. This amounts, he says, to emphasizing “expressive sovereignty” as opposed to “decisional sovereignty,” which is determined by anonymous structures (presumably such as laws, constitutions, and institutions in general). This distinction, Connolly suggests, must be completed with another, the distinction between “internal and external sovereignty” (p. 133), a distinction that teaches us, Connolly believes, that “there is always an outside to state sovereignty, an outside which ... concludes and exceeds the constraints posed by other states and interstate relations.” In short, power is always relative to a field determined by boundaries. These boundaries, of course, are not only physical; in fact they are less and less so as power becomes increasingly financial, and therefore, non-physical (p. 133). As a result, the current state of the world is determined by relations of power that minoritize power, make global power abstract and uncontrollable, and leave

most of us without ways of expressing our own power. Indeed, apart from the degrees of abstraction power has now attained, the post-modern world Connolly is describing here is no different from the one La Boetie described five centuries ago: it is the scattering of power (which Connolly calls minoritization) which ensures that without holding more power than those they dominate, the rulers remain in positions of power. In such a world, Connolly appeals to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of a "resonance machine" with the ability to increase the amount of power in the world by investing the symbolic realm with power also and allowing scattered and minoritized constituencies and "loose forces" to enter into connection (p. 139). Inexplicably, Connolly doesn't pursue the essential connection between this project and Nietzsche's description of the "slave revolt in morality out of the spirit of resentment"). This is why Connolly suggests, that "a cross-region/capital/media/spiritual machine now creates and exacerbates regional hostilities" (p. 142).

This is a situation, Connolly thinks, which must inform the way we must act out our responsibilities as citizens. For Connolly, it is the individual that must be empowered insofar as only at the individual level are we able to exploit our deepest political instincts and "intuitions" (p. 144) (presumably, those have the greatest chance of inspiring wise actions and political decisions) and as a result, Connolly writes: "we must work on mood, belief, desire and action together" as a way to harness our inevitable sense of *ressentiment* in a constructive manner (p. 147).

The next and last chapter must therefore conclude by returning to the question of the relations between power and the understanding of a world of becoming. In Connolly's view, a world of becoming is in opposition with those political theories that "adopt a punctual, linear conception of secular time" relying on "the observational image of inquiry, an efficient concept of causality, a notion of probable progress, and a vision of the theorist as an autonomous agent who stands outside the world to be explained and judged," (p. 148) that is, it seems, not many actual theories in currency today. The bulk of the chapter, entitled "The Theorist and the Seer," is thus devoted to observing in detail what this opposition involves for political theorists, as the structures hitherto projected onto the world melt away

and render it unreadable by way of current methods. Connolly uses a truly original and sensitive detour through an analysis of Jerry Lewis' *The Nutty Professor* in order to present the way that in the agent and in the theorist alike, intuition must return to preeminence, once the intuitive agent is educated in the world of becoming: the nutty professor's achievement is therefore to relinquish academic knowledge for that of a intuitive seer.

Connolly's intentions in *A World of Becoming* are ostensibly programmatic and performative. It is, in Nietzsche's famous analogy, a "fishhook" cast into the sea, a strategy to embolden and federate kindred spirits. In the awareness of this fact, it would be disingenuous on our part to lament its lack of unity, or the relative arbitrariness of the references (why Merleau-Ponty and not Foucault here, why Whitehead and not Schelling there? Why no explicit engagement with Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*?) or in the construal of the ideas proposed by the philosophers and thinkers summoned here (why so much on Nietzsche's concept of agonism and so little on his critique of the subject?). In contrast, a balanced reading should, I think, focus on the ability of the book to fulfill its stated goals, namely: does it succeed in convincing us that we do indeed live in a world of becoming, that this has implications for our political life and for the way we should satisfy our everyday responsibilities?

The answer to this question must be mixed, for one structural reason. Defending Connolly's avoidance of in-depth analysis of the key authors and conceptual problems brought to contribute to his argument on the basis that its intentions are chiefly performative and not analytic fails to recognize that such relative weaknesses risk blunting precisely its performative ability to convince the reader. Is it really possible to understand what a world of becoming means while retaining, as it seems Connolly does, a traditional concept of the individual as a relevant, atomic, and elemental political entity? Is it even possible to invoke the likes of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty without questioning the notions of selfhood, agency, and individuality? Indeed, Connolly is acutely aware that these notions all fall short in a world of becoming, but he does not seem willing to analyze the ontological consequences of the necessary critique of such fundamental concepts. Is

it enough, even from a strictly political point of view, to point to the flow that leads from the individual to the constituency, and to the permeable boundaries of the inside and the outside of a polity without posing the question of the proper theoretical view of agency that this entails? Indeed, this may lead us to the core paradox at work in *A World of Becoming*: how can one seek to reduce the world of political relations to becoming while maintaining that any theoretical reduction is made irrelevant in the said world of becoming? Of course, this paradox is at the heart of a number of post-modernist works of the recent decades, and the key motivation behind the Anglo-American infatuation for a certain brand of pluralism that insists that it must itself be pluralistically defined, at the risk of collapsing into the impossibility to theorize at all, becoming one more impractical practical philosophy, one more way, to use Peguy's word against Kant, of keeping one's hands clean by having no hands. Indeed, it seems that the unacknowledged problem of pluralism remains an open wound in the book. Indeed, Connolly does encounter the problem of the double necessity for commitment and 'agonistic respect,' but he makes no serious attempt at escaping the *prima facie* conclusion of this problem, a thoroughly relativistic conclusion. This is, in this reviewer's view, because *A World of Becoming* lacks an analysis of the relations between a belief and its object, but instead remains in a world of political opinions unstructured by this object. This is an analysis, which, as the readers of *The Agonist* will appreciate, is precisely of the type that Nietzsche seeks to problematize with his concept of agonistic contest.

Indeed, it seems that, of all the hooks Connolly casts in the water with this book, the one most likely to catch a reader of *The Agonist* is his handling of Nietzsche, and here, Connolly deserves the highest praises for displaying in his opening chapters an intuitive understanding of the deep and possibly systematic kinship between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies. Of course, like it is perhaps too often the case in this book, the point remains hinted at, and the connection between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty is often left implicitly mediated by Prigogine, whose deep connection with Nietzsche was established in a remarkable article co-authored with Jane Bennett (Bennett and Connolly, 2002). There is, for Connolly, a connection between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty's

questioning of the notions of entity, polity, individuality, etc., and a certain awareness that the constitution of individuals is a result, not a condition, of intersubjectivity and of intentionality in general. As a result, Connolly seems to recognize that both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty agree that *objects* must be seen as *events*, and events must be seen as *folds* which are only *horizontally* connected to (and disconnected from) each other (p. 44 ff.) (Characteristically, Connolly keeps away from such technical Merleau-Pontean vocabulary).

A World of Becoming has generous and immediate socio-political intentions, and navigates through many of the most intriguing thinkers of the last decades, and indeed, centuries. Its core philosophical ambiguities, which make it oscillate constantly between performativity and information, enactment and theory, analysis and description, is both responsible for the wealth of possibilities it hints at and for the overall sense that in this book, things remain somewhat more intuitive than they need to be.

- Beistegui, Miguel de, "Science and Ontology," *Angelaki*, 10:2 (Winter, 2005): 109-122.
- Bennett, Jane and Connolly, William E., "Contesting Nature/Culture: the Creative Character of Thinking," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* Issue 24 (Fall, 2002): 148-163.