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Engaging plurality

Reflections on *The Ethos of Pluralization**

Postmodern thinking has often been criticized as implicitly nihilistic, or at least as lacking the resources from which an ethics could be created. Although there have been many who have denied that charge, the only convincing refutation would be to offer such an ethics. The signal accomplishment of *The Ethos of Pluralization* is that it does so. And it does so in a powerful, even inspiring way.[1] Connolly offers us not a fixed set of moral principles, nor a singular account of the good life to govern our choices and our characters. Rather, his ethic is moved by the way in which moral commitments can themselves lead to the infliction of cruelty upon others and by the epistemological limits under which we must now labor, limits which preclude us from offering any particular vision as necessary because it is grounded in God, reason, or nature. His point of departure is a non-theistic but reverentialist view of life and nature combined with a deep and continuing awareness of both the need for some sense of identity and purpose, and the impossibility that any account of identity could capture the manifold, protean aspects of life. This issues in a commitment to developing an attitude of critical responsiveness towards others, in which we strive to be open to the ways in which our understandings of ourselves and the world are both worthy of affirmation but also limiting, even oppressive, potentially preventing others from finding their voice and the language and social position from which they can assert their identities. Connolly does not offer a narrowly ethical ideal, but a vision of a public life based on the cultivation of an ethos of pluralization, a politics of agonistic democracy.

This work is politically engaged. Running through it, as well as many of his earlier writings, is a deep appreciation of the ways in which

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the dominant ideologies of our time, particularly and ironically American liberalism, support policies and underlie a public culture that alienates large sectors of our society – particularly white working-class men – and feeds a right-wing, fundamentalist backlash. Practicing the ethos of pluralization himself, Connolly helps us to hear these voices, and to find ways in which to respond to them. While fully acknowledging the insights of traditional political theories, Connolly argues that they now must be transcended. In particular, we must move to the 'ontopolitical' level, engaging the ontologies underlying current political positions, if we are to grasp and respond to the serious issues we face.

In these remarks, I focus on this aspect of Connolly's argument, contrasting it specifically with political liberalism, which deliberately tries to avoid that move. Connolly argues that political liberalism's strategy of avoidance is unsuccessful; what it leads to is the uncritical acceptance of ontological assumptions that 'contain dangerous elements and demands within them' (4). I do not deny these dangers, but I would like to suggest that they may be overstated and that the cultivation of critical responsiveness, which Connolly so eloquently presents, does not require us to abandon the liberal strategy of avoiding ontopolitical commitment. I will further suggest what seem to me to be dangers in Connolly's vision of agonistic democracy. In particular, I fear that the vision he offers has the potential of exacerbating the fundamentalist backlash in American politics. I will deal with two issues; the first is the response to fundamentalism, which implicates the liberal commitment to neutrality, and the second is the problem of punishment, which implicates the idea of responsible agency. In both cases, Connolly offers us important insights and warnings, but I will suggest that we can and should incorporate them without making the ontopolitical move that Connolly proposes. Connolly teaches us the importance of critical responsiveness to others, but ultimately, I will argue, the value of critical responsiveness depends upon the recognition of the priority of justice as political liberalism conceives it.

Responding to fundamentalism

Connolly's effort is motivated in part by an engagement with the issues we face as citizens, such as the growth of social inequality, polarization along racial and ethnic lines, ecological imbalances and the hysteria over crime. Symptomatic of these crises, both as a cause and as a response to them on the part of large numbers of people, is the politics of fundamentalism.

> Fundamentalism . . . is a general imperative to assert an absolute, singular ground of authority; to ground your own identity and allegiances in this

> unquestionable source; to define political issues in a vocabulary of God, morality, or nature that invokes such a certain, authoritative source; and to condemn tolerance, abortion, pluralism, radicalism, homosexuality, secular humanism, welfarism, and internationalism (among other things) by imputing moral weakness, relativism, selfishness, or corruption to them. (105)

Connolly recognizes that 'every doctrine . . . rests upon fundamentals'; what is distinctive to fundamentalism is that it is 'a set of political strategies to protect these fundaments by defining every carrier of critique or destabilization as an enemy marked by exactly those defects, weaknesses, corruptions, and naivetes you are under an absolute imperative to eliminate' (105–6).

Drawing on his earlier analyses of the American political condition, Connolly sketches the dislocations that have made so many Americans susceptible to fundamentalist appeal, particularly the white, working-class males whose anger and resentment have been the subject of so much commentary of late. Part of the problem, he argues, is that 'American liberalism too often takes the form of a doctrine that conceals its own strain of fundamentalism from itself' (123). This is particularly true of its claim to 'neutrality' which functions to deny entrance to the political sphere for the aspirations of 'evangelical Christians, Orthodox Jews, secular communitarians, rhizomatic pluralists, Amerindian peoples, Marxists, and postmodernists', while enshrining liberal values there. Ironically, it is the very deafness that liberals show 'to charges of bias and hypocrisy levelled against them' that 'deepen[s] and extend[s]' the 'rage' of their opponents (125).

I am doubtful that liberal neutrality has as much significance as Connolly suggests. Many versions of liberalism make no claim to neutrality, but offer (at least in their most ambitious moments) a secular faith in the human capacity to shape its own destiny, one opposed to tradition and religious authority. Political liberalism, the target of Connolly's critique, seems to me to occupy a relatively small space in really existing liberalism, in liberalism as we find it in part of the Democratic Party, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Organization of Women (NOW), unions, Planned Parenthood, mainline civil rights groups, etc. Nonetheless, to the extent that false – or more likely, misunderstood – pretensions of neutrality contribute to the shrillness of our politics, Connolly's criticisms, and the cultivation of an ethos of critical responsiveness that he calls for, may go some way to reduce the suspicions of those drawn to conservative fundamentalism, and so to undermine its political power.

I fear, however, that this move would not take us far, much as I would wish otherwise, since it would do little to overcome the deep substantive differences we face. For example, Connolly suggests that if

liberal secularists showed more 'appreciation of the doctrine of soul competency', moderates in 'the Southern Baptist movement might become more open to dialogue'. If pro-choice advocates were willing to acknowledge that a woman's 'inviolate right to choice' cannot be proven, opponents of abortion might be more willing to acknowledge that the same is true of their belief 'that a divine spark resides in life from the moment of conception', leading both to recognize that 'abortion cannot be proven to be murder', and so 'the particular faith of each adult should be determinative in exactly this territory' (129–30). Unfortunately, arguments such as these are already part of the discourse, and show little sign of bringing abortion opponents to accept the pro-choice position, which – ironically – is the only outcome Connolly discusses.

While critical responsiveness to others and a willingness to interrogate one's own deepest convictions are essential, they seem to lead to many of the key liberal political convictions and policies that are rejected on substantive grounds by fundamentalists. However problematic, the liberal ideal of neutrality expresses the conviction that political power should not be used to impose a particular conception of the good on those who have reasonable grounds to reject it, and that all citizens have an obligation to tolerate others, even if they abhor their values and commitments, so long as they follow the laws that make ordered liberty possible. It is for this reason that assorted 'evangelical Christians, Orthodox Jews, secular communitarians, Amerindian peoples, and Marxists'[2] reject liberal neutrality, for it prevents them from imposing their values upon others. But Connolly's vision incorporates the same restriction, demanding tolerance and non-imposition:

> . . . a democratic, pluralizing regime should tolerate a fundamentalist constituency, but it must resist the drive of such a constituency to impose its exclusionary norms upon the entire culture. (193–4)

It is hard to imagine how pluralism could exist without these twin requirements of toleration and non-imposition.

In his call for critical responsiveness, Connolly's ethos of pluralization might be more accommodating to some varieties of what we might call traditionalist thinking than conventional liberalism.[3] But it might also be even more threatening to them, since it rests upon a much more radical rejection of their world-views than does conventional liberalism. The latter, at least as represented by the recent work of Rawls, rests on the idea of 'reasonable disagreement'. It holds that even if a particular understanding of human flourishing and excellence is 'true' in the sense that it conforms to the dictates of reason or God, or is inscribed in the structure of nature itself, human reasoning is fallible. While one might have (what one takes to be) absolutely certain knowledge of that truth (say, because it was revealed by God), one lacks adequate grounds on

which to convince others of it. To claim that one would be justified in using the coercive force of the state to impose one's views on others, then, would be unreasonable, as it would be to claim a public justification for one's views that one does not have. At least that is so if one is committed to democracy, and so to the idea that

> . . . since political power is the coercive power of free and equal citizens [acting] as a corporate body, this power should be exercised, when constitutional essentials and basic questions of justice are at stake, only in ways that all citizens can reasonably be expected to endorse. (Rawls, 1993: 140–1)

Political liberalism, while blocking the translation of contested value positions into law, does not directly deny or challenge them.

The ethos of pluralism, on the other hand, clearly seems to do so. Its public life is based on the premise that 'nothing is fundamental', that no set of concepts or principles can adequately capture the truth of our being, and that every belief, every commitment, is not only contestable, but partial and, in a certain way, false, giving rise to unjust exclusions and forms of repression. Those who hold traditionalist beliefs may be tolerated in an agonistic democracy, but its public culture seems radically to delegitimate them.

Responsible agency and the politics of revenge

In his discussion of criminality and punishment, Connolly focuses on the way in which the model of responsible agency can foster desires for revenge against criminals, particularly when directed against groups that are despised or are seen as threatening, such as young black men. Connolly argues that our practices of crime and punishment rest upon a model of the person as a responsible agent, and assume that we must be completely able to control our behavior. He (rightly) insists that this conception is false, because a person 'does not exercise sovereignty over formation of its own economy of desire' (62). To develop this point, he sketches an account of the 'economy of desire' in America today which shows how a man could have come to perform a particularly brutal crime a few years ago in Baltimore, having been moved by 'imperious desires'. The difference between him and us, Connolly suggests, is that our imperious desires have a 'relatively fortunate etiology' compared with such desires in those of 'more violent sensualities' (71).

Connolly hopes that our coming to see 'the potential imperiousness of violent desire' will undermine 'the violent inflation of responsibility in the contemporary identification and punishment of crime' (71). That does not mean that crime can be ignored, nor does the ethos of

pluralization project a utopian society in which crime will disappear. Rather, we may imprison criminals not to 'punish' them, but 'only to protect others from the fate suffered by [their] victims, and only as long as the probability is high that [they] will repeat such acts in the future' (72).

Purging revenge from the criminal justice system is a laudable goal, and the cultivation of critical responsiveness is essential to it. But the 'protective' rationale for imprisonment is a dangerous one, even more dangerous than the retributive model Connolly criticizes. Although Connolly would have us imprison someone only if he or she is likely to *repeat* a crime, it is hard to see why the commission of a crime is necessary for imprisonment, if the purpose of incarceration is to protect future victims. The crucial factor in this justification is our ability to predict what someone will do, and there may be other variables apart from past criminality that enable us to make such predictions. Thus, this justification permits (or even requires) incarcerating not only those who have committed crimes, but also those whose probability of doing so is sufficiently high. Since our ability to predict behavior is pretty limited, this model could provide a rationalization for targeting whole categories of people as potential criminals. But even if this danger were avoided, the idea of imprisoning people who have not committed a crime, or even imprisoning them for a length of time that is completely disproportionate to the crimes they have committed, is disturbing.

An advantage of the conventional model of punishment is that it provides a compelling reason why only those who have been found guilty of a crime may be punished. And while Connolly is certainly correct that this model rests upon some concept of responsible agency, it is far from clear that it requires that the self be sovereign over its desires. The concept of responsible agency in our culture does not presuppose that our wills are radically free, nor is it limited to what we deliberately do, as Williams (1993) has cogently argued. For example, we hold ourselves morally responsible for much more than we genuinely intend, because the actions we perform can affect our lives and others in profound ways. Consider someone who has struck and killed a child who had run across the street in front of her car. None of us find her sense that she is responsible to be unintelligible, even if her action is not blameable, nor would we admire her if she trained herself to be the kind of person who wouldn't feel such remorse in that situation.

To be sure, we can find 'strong' concepts of moral agency in philosophical accounts, particularly those stressing retributive theories of punishment, Kant and Hegel being paradigmatic. But, as Williams has argued, such narrow definitions of responsibility in the criminal law function to limit state power, by restricting the uses to which the criminal law can be put, and requiring a high burden of proof before punish-

ment can be inflicted (Williams, 1993: 65). It rules out, for example, imprisoning someone because there is a high probability he or she will commit a crime.

The conventional understanding of punishment rests upon some idea of universality since it views crime as an offense against the universal, a violation of a norm that the criminal himself or herself has sufficient reason to accept. Punishment, in this view, is just and necessary: just, because it deprives the wrong-doer of the unjustly acquired benefits of wrong-doing; necessary, because it affirms the norm that has been violated and by restraint and deterrence sustains the possibility of a just set of social arrangements. Viewing wrong-doing in this way does not amount to a form of fundamentalism, to elevating one's own beliefs 'above the possibility of critical reflection' (106). We must remain open to the possibility that the norms we enforce cannot be justified to all who are subject to them, but this possibility does not entail that no norms can be justified in that way.

When we harm others not because they have violated a valid norm, but simply because their actions have hurt or disappointed us, our action is not punishment but revenge. Indeed, that is why the determination of wrong-doing and punishment must be taken out of the hands of the harmed party, and placed in the hands of an authority representing both, for as long as my action is that of a private person, those affected cannot experience it as anything but my seeking to harm them for my own reasons. Locke is wrong in thinking that there could be a right to punish in the state of nature.

In any real-life situation, of course, the intention to punish will always be mixed with the desire for revenge. Nor should we suppose that the kind of unity and coherence this model projects can be fully achieved. T. H. Green's extravagant claim that the criminal 'himself recognises [his punishment] as just, as his due or desert' will not normally be realized (Green, 1967: 186). It is difficult to see how full mutuality could exist between the judge and the criminal. The criminal's pain will often overwhelm his or her reason, his or her ability to view the situation from the point of view of the judge. On the other hand, the judge and those carrying out the violence the judge orders will not experience the criminal's pain. For them, the pain will be secondary, and they will focus on the legal or moral principles justifying their actions. Because of the essential separateness of persons, and of our experiences, 'There will always be a tragic limit to the common meaning that can be achieved' (Cover, 1986: 1629).

But even if we cannot achieve full mutuality in every case, it does not mean that 'punishment' necessarily conceals a desire for revenge, from which it would follow that imprisoning criminals is simply a form of assault. While that may sometimes be true – as when a man is punished

for loving another man – the norm the criminal transgresses may express a universal interest, and the criminal's act may be a genuine wrong.[4]

Conclusion

Perhaps the deepest difference between the ethos of pluralization and political liberalism concerns the priority of justice. One of Connolly's richest and most insightful discussions is the account of the way in which justice and critical responsiveness are 'bound together in a relation of dissonant interdependence' (187). Connolly argues that any code of justice, even one framed in universal terms, is always understood and applied in ways that reflect particular understandings of who and what constitutes a subject of justice. The 'rights of man and citizen' are never self-interpreting, and whether a certain group enjoys those rights may depend on whether it is constituted, say, as 'homosexuals' suffering from a pathology or as 'gays'. Any 'operative code of justice' therefore 'sets up barriers to pluralization by placing a series of injuries and grievance under justice' (187). They are 'under justice' because they are not recognized as raising issues of justice, either because that form of suffering is not recognized as an 'injury' or because those who suffer are not recognized as subjects of justice, or (perhaps more likely) both.

These are powerful, telling observations. But I am not convinced that the 'ethos of critical responsiveness is more fundamental than justice', exceeding 'the codes of justice nourished by it' (187). True, any particular code of justice will be partial, but critical responsiveness will not necessarily 'nourish justice' unless it is motivated at least in part by what Scanlon calls the motivation of morality, that is, 'the desire to be able to justify one's actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject' (Scanlon, 1982: 116). It is this commitment that is foundational to political liberalism. Fulfilling it requires critical responsiveness to specific others; to see, for example, why someone might reasonably reject a particular norm, we would have to understand how she sees her life, what her commitments and goals are, so that we can understand how that norm burdens her. But this recognition by itself does not give us reason for rejecting the norm, unless we have the desire to justify our actions to others, to live under rules and principles that all can accept. Connolly's broad conception of critical responsiveness to the fullness of being does not necessarily lead to the motivation of morality, since it does not constrain what we may do by the need to justify our actions to others.

In this work Connolly brings alive the idea of critical responsiveness and its ethical importance, an idea that has too often been neglected by traditional political theories. But it is an idea that can be incorporated by them, or at least by political liberalism, without making the ontopolitical

move that Connolly prescribes, a move which I have suggested involves dangers that are as great as or greater than those we now face.

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Notes

*This symposium on William E. Connolly's *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) focuses on the author's distinctive efforts to develop an affirmative ethical-political position that draws heavily from Nietzsche and Foucault, and that builds on his earlier work, most notably *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). The contributors are J. Donald Moon, Stephen K. White and Frederick M. Dolan, with a response by Connolly. The symposium was held at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, in San Francisco, 28 August–1 September 1996.

1 Parenthetical references in the text, unless otherwise indicated, are to this text.
2 I have omitted two of Connolly's categories, rhizomatic pluralists and post-modernists, because they seem to be committed to this principle, even if they do not accept this formulation.
3 I substitute the term 'traditionalist' for 'fundamentalist' here because I wish to direct attention to those who hold certain views dogmatically, whether or not they seek to impose them on others. I recognize that not all dogmatists are 'traditionalists' in any meaningful sense of the term.
4 'Universal' in the sense that all subject to the rule would freely endorse it, not that it holds for all possible times and places. There is obviously a lot more that has to be said on this point, but even if we accept the idea that no set of norms or values can fully capture everything that can be affirmed in life, it does not follow that every norm is partial, representing a form of violent imposition on some identity or subject position.

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