



The Politicization of Neuroscience and The Destruction of Psychology

by C. Fred Alford

Something odd is going on in political theory: the politicization of neuroscience. One result is to render depth psychology irrelevant, or rather simply wrong. Another result, even more puzzling, is the self-destruction of political theory by some of its leading lights. Political theory is about power relationships among people who live in communities, societies, and nations. Once the individual is lifted out of society and community, and seen instead as a neuro-physiological system, there is no need or place for political theory.

Leaders in the neuroscientific interpretation of political theory are William Connolly (2002) and Brian Massumi (1995, 2002). Both use neuroscience to criticize political and social theorists who have made reason central. Immanuel Kant is their *bête noir*, but any theorist of deliberative democracy, any theorist who emphasizes the centrality of rational argument, from John Rawls to Jürgen Habermas, is subject to their critique. By making reason central, these political and social theorists have sacrificed freedom, or so Connolly and Massumi argue.

While this claim might have merit in general, the way in which Connolly, Massumi, and others use neuroscience reinforces the mind/body split, abandoning Freud's concept of the psychical unconscious. This is bad because it results in a superficial subject. I say this fully recognizing that Connolly et al. (as I shall sometimes call them) *seek* a superficial subject. The deep subject of Freudian psychoanalysis has alienated us from the freedom and rationality of the body, or so they say. Connolly assumes that individual development takes place almost entirely inside the individual. I will call this neurological individualism.

This assumption rejects a key assumption of British object relations theory, as well as the way humans have understood each other for millennia, as reflected in art and literature. From Bowlby to Bion to Winnicott and beyond, the British School has argued that we develop as we are held, contained, and understood by a community of others, beginning with our first primary caretaker, usually mother. To be sure, Connolly et al. have little to say about emotional development. However, one cannot have a theory of freedom, the aspect of political theory they focus on, without an implicit theory of development. Connolly would likely reject this argument as deep in just the sense he is trying to escape. We will have to judge whether his sophisticated superficiality, based upon what is called the "missing moment" is worth the price.

The missing moment characterizes the delay between an unconscious experience and the subject's reaction to it. The delay is interpreted as indicating that the conscious mind is busy rationalizing a decision made for reasons of which the conscious self is unaware. The price of making the missing moment central to one's theory is the loss of

a subject who is connected with the family he or she is raised in, and the community he or she lives in. This alternative will be laid out with a little help from D.W. Winnicott.

An outline of the alternative Connolly et al. propose can be seen in the methodological assumptions of theorists such as Nigel Thrift. “Individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate” (Thrift, 2004, p. 60). If an individual understood him or herself in this way, we would regard him or her as mad, or at least in a bizarre state of alienation from his or her body. The contemporary neuroscience of affect regards this as a potentially desirable state, as it liberates the individual from the illusion that he or she is identical with consciousness.

A mark of the new neuroscience is its suspicion of narrative. Narrative is the fiction we tell ourselves to give our lives a continuity they do not possess, as if the missing moment had not occurred. Narrative bridges the missing moment, is invented in retrospect in order to explain the missing moment, and is in this sense fictional. Against the neuroscience of affect, I argue that the missing moment only heightens the split between mind and body. The result is to equate the unconscious with body (albeit a subtle and clever body), and mind with consciousness.

Neurological individualism or relational psychology?

In *Neuropolitics*, William Connolly (2002) writes of the narrative gap between experience and explanation, suggesting that the half-second delay between experience and conscious awareness of the experience is not a consequence of trauma, but a normal experience. Connolly’s key example is a sixteen-year-old girl treated by a team of neurophysiologists for severe epilepsy. Applying an electric probe to eighty-five separate spots on her left frontal lobe, they eventually hit by chance upon that part of the brain that made her laugh. The more current, the more laughter, so that a slight smile was produced by a low current; robust, contagious laughter by a higher current. Remarkable is that every time she was asked why she was laughing, she always had an explanation that referred to an external stimulus, one which we know to be retrospective. Whether we know it to be simply false is another question, one which Connolly wisely does not address. When asked why she was laughing when directed to point at the researchers, she says “you guys are just so funny...standing around.” When asked to name an object, she said, “the horse is funny,” and laughed (Fried et al., 1998, p. 650).

The inference Connolly draws is that “‘incomprehensible quantities of unconscious calculation’ take place during the half-second delay between the reception of sensory material and the consolidation of perceptions, feelings, and judgments” (2002, p. 82). The internal quotation is from Tor Nørretranders (1998, p. 221), who refers to the “quick, crude reaction time of the amygdala that precedes feeling and consciousness.” Nothing else in this example refers to the amygdala, though it turns out to be a major player in this neuropsychic drama. The calculation to which Connolly refers stems from a gap in psychic time that seems to allow people to retroactively, and seemingly quite arbitrarily, attribute explanations for their experiences. Or, as Leslie

Paul Thiele (2006, p. 212) puts it in *The Heart of Judgment*, “our conscious judgments are mostly afterthoughts. They bespeak the efforts of a left hemisphere... feigning cognitive control through the narrative fabrication of a self.”

Thiele goes on to argue that good judgment is a matter of getting the right parts of our brain involved in our experience. It is in this context that he quotes Connolly, asking “how...can the amygdala be educated?” It’s an important question since the amygdala is the most primitive part of the mammalian brain, involved in our responses to fear and disgust, among other primary emotions. Connolly’s answer to his own question is that the amygdala, “or, more likely, the network of relays in which it is set may be susceptible to modest influence by rituals and intersubjective arts” (Thiele, 2006, p. 155; Connolly, 1999, p. 29). Film would be an example of an intersubjective art for Connolly.

Connolly believes that he has written a story about human ethics as well as human freedom. Socrates’ “know thyself” is both impossible and imprisoning. The narrative self, understood as a self that knows itself as part of a larger story, such as a religious story, in which a life is given meaning by participating in a transcendent story, is bound to be a lie. A grand lie perhaps, a world historical lie, but a lie nonetheless, what Jean-François Lyotard (1984) calls a metanarrative, about which we should be incredulous. Emancipation and ethics stem from sources deep within the brain. Connolly is not always an easy read, but the following quotation is worth the trouble.

Our foray into the neurophysiology of the human brain, for instance, is compatible with the speculation that the apodictic experience of morality as law recorded by Kant does not flow from the noumenal to the phenomenal realm as he contended. It may flow, rather, from the infrasensible dictates of the amygdala into higher consciousness. If so, it may be wise to cultivate an orientation to ethics that draws its initial impetus from elsewhere, for the amygdala is implicated in a larger brain system that triggers fear, anxiety, and resentment. (Connolly, 2002, p. 104)

From this perspective, freedom stems not from following universal values that allow us to participate in a larger story, but from experiments with self-expression, playing with one’s brain, using every means possible, from participating in local politics to taking yourself to the movies, as Connolly puts it.

Citing several neuroscientists, Lesley Thiele asserts that the momentary delay between initiating an action and our conscious awareness of this action is a sign that consciousness is faking it, pretending it knows what we are doing. “It would be detrimental to one’s sense of (an autonomous) self to perceive actions as products of impulses that one could only retroactively endorse. Hence we are structured to remain oblivious to the tardiness of conscious responses” (Thiele, 2006, p. 210). The half-second delay, now between act and consciousness of the act, becomes a theory of mind. We literally do not know what we are doing, and most of our explanations have the quality of the young epileptic woman explaining her laughter: retrospective rationalization. If we aimed our education, what Connolly calls our “rituals and intersubjective arts,” at the cultivation of the amygdala, we might get further.

Educating the amygdala sounds silly, does it not? One might be tempted to equate the amygdala with the unconscious mind, but that would be a mistake. Affect theorists, as Connolly, Massumi, Thiele, Thrift, and others, are generally known, make a sharp distinction between intensity or affect, as they call it, and the unconscious mind. Affect is emotion disengaged from narrative convention. Affect is raw, unmeaningful, pre-meaningful emotion: un-tied-down emotion. As Eric Shouse (2005) puts it,

Affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social...and affects are pre-personal...An affect is a nonconscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential...Affect cannot be fully realised in language... because affect is always prior to and/or outside consciousness.

Conversely, emotion is intensity owned and recognized (Massumi, 1995, p. 88; Leys, 2011, pp. 441-442). Connolly et al. have reinforced the mind/body split, abandoning Freud's concept of a psychological unconscious. "On this post-psychoanalytic model, what is not fully conscious must necessarily be corporeal or material" (Leys, 2011, p. 459, n. 43). This is why one cannot take the simple step of equating the amygdala with the unconscious. The missing half-second splits body and mind in such a way as to simplify mind, rendering it equivalent to consciousness. Unconsciousness now belongs to the body, where it becomes unknowable.

Or rather, unknowable according to the usual ways of knowing. In *The Primacy of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 440) wrote that "in so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose."¹ The body has its own truths, its own language, expressed in terms of what Connolly calls memory traces (2002, p. 121).¹ For Connolly, these memory traces take the place of the Freudian unconscious.

Freud encloses memory traces within a deep interpretation in which he knows the source and shape of the most archaic traces, even though those beset by them do not. The perspective developed here refuses for ethical reasons to join the appreciation of layering and depth to the hubris of deep, authoritative interpretation. (Connolly 2002, p. 40)

Surely, Connolly is aware that there is more than one psychoanalyst, more than one interpretation of unconscious experience. In fact, one suspects it is not so much the hubris of Freud's authority that Connolly would be free of, but the depth and

¹ Merleau-Ponty wrote these comments to criticize idealistic speculation, which he believed was fostered by Cartesian dualism. The context of the quotation makes this clear, with its reference to a viewpoint from Sirius, from which the Alps would look like molehills. But never to embodied humans.

complexity of the unconscious mind, which gets in the way of the claims of the body to its own truths.

Connolly et al. do not reject narrative. In some ways it becomes more important, as it fills and highlights the missing moment. Narrative becomes, in effect, more complex versions of the stories told by the epileptic girl about what's funny. It is in this context that Thiele (2006, p. 263) mentions Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 175).

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt refers to Isak Dinesen's remark that "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." The statement underlines the significance of narrative to psychological health. Indeed, Arendt seems to suggest that the only possible way to redeem the human condition is through stories and the retrospective judgments they allow. For Arendt, our narrative evaluations make the ultimately tragic world of phenomenal existence meaningful, and thus bearable.

How does Thiele put these two claims together? Or do they need to be put together? The first claim is that our explanations are always rationalizations, in the sense of reasons for actions we do not truly understand. The second claim is that we need not just explanations, but a series of explanations woven into a story, in order to explain the actions and events, the things we do and the things that happen to us, that are our lives.

The answer seems to be that these two statements do not need to be put together, for they are compatible. However, they need to be qualified. Thiele is fascinated with the idea that the narrative self is preceded by a pre-narrative self. Following the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, also cited frequently by Connolly, Thiele argues that the narratives we tell are "second order" narratives. Our first narratives are neural narratives, cultivated by the same basic, non-verbal narration that accompanies the development of the cerebral cortex, right brain as well as left. Or, as Damasio puts it, "Language enriches the human self even if it does not serve as its source" (Thiele, 2006, p. 203-205, quoting Damasio and Damasio, 1996, p. 22).

In Thiele's world, the sense of self that develops as the brain imagistically maps its interactions with the world does not depend on language. Rather, these maps "constitute a nonverbal narrative document" (Thiele, 2006, p. 203). Thiele's illustrations of how this might work are optical illusions, which represent "wordless neural storylines."

Consider another possibility: that under the influence of neuroscience, Thiele assumes that a "nonverbal narrative document" is a strictly intrapsychic development, whose evolution can be described much as a fetus develops, or as a brain develops. Here lies the source of the neurological individualism of the neuroscientific approach to political theory referred to earlier: the assumption that individual development takes place inside the individual. This assumption follows the individual into adulthood, as Connolly's examples of how one might use everyday techniques to alter one's thinking, discussed shortly, reveal.

Consider the alternative: that the child is fundamentally related to others from birth. It is these relationships with others from which our stories flow. The developmental psychiatrist Daniel Stern (1992, p. 65), in a book written for mothers about what their babies might be feeling, puts words to four-and-a-half-month-old Joey's feelings, as Stern imagines them.

“Mother's smile becomes a light breeze that reaches across to touch me. It caresses me.” In reaching across to touch him, her smile exerts its natural evocative powers and sets in motion its contagiousness. Her smile triggers a smile in him and breathes a vitality into him. It makes him resonate with the animation she feels and shows. His joy rises. Her smile pulls it out of him.

Consider the difference. Joey is animated and develops in relationship to mother, and then others. It is not his brain that develops (though that develops too); it is Joey's self that develops. To be sure, the self, too, is neuronally based, but it is understood not as a fetus develops, but as a person does. Long before humans can talk, we are involved in relationships, and it is from these relationships that narratives are woven. Our first stories are stories about our relationships with people, relationships that have been internalized during our first year. It is these internalized relationships that are the building-blocks of narrative.

The psychoanalyst Hanna Segal, commenting on Jacques Lacan's claim that the unconscious is structured like a language said simply. “I think it's the other way around.” Language is structured like the unconscious. There is a lot going on pre-verbally, parents and bodies and so forth are all symbolized. Eventually the young child verbalizes. For Segal, this reveals that it is language that emerges from the unconscious, not the unconscious modeling itself on language. “When language eventually emerges, it reflects the structure of our basic functions: subject, object, and action” (Quinodoz 2008, p. 73; Segal, 2007, p. 252). Language symbolizes body, and relationships among bodies and body parts, going on to represent more abstract relationships as we develop. Language does not develop in the icy, polar isolation of a neuronal map, even if every one of these relationships is reflected in a neuronal map.

Joey and his mother reside in what the analyst D.W. Winnicott (1989) called transitional space. Transitional space is first experienced when the child is held by its mother or other caretaker. If mother is in tune with her child, which means that she neither crushes the child with her anxiety, nor drops the child with her distraction and mental absence, the child does not have to even think, “I feel held.” Instead, the child is free to be. Holding begins with the way in which mothers and others handle the baby, but it comes to include all of the ways in which civilization acts to help us find a place in this world. Or, as Winnicott (1971, p. 99) puts it, “I have used the term cultural experience as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena and of play.”

Transitional space is created through the experience of attunement between mother and child. Stern is describing the creation of transitional space, only we must remember it is a lifetime's achievement. It begins when mother coos when baby smiles, but continues throughout a lifetime of relationships. In attunement, the rhythmic

holding environment responds to the mood of another, often in a different register. In attunement, your feelings evoke comparable, but not identical reactions in me. Attunement is emotional rhythm. It is through this rhythm that the holding environment fades into the background, becomes the background. A perfect holding environment would be imperceptible. And in a perfect holding environment a baby would never grow up. Needed is not perfect parenting but the good-enough mother, as Winnicott (1971, 10) calls her.

Winnicott refers to experiences of separation in terms of the “I AM” moment, a raw moment in which “the new individual feels infinitely exposed. Only if someone has her arms around the infant at this time can the I AM moment be endured, or rather, perhaps, risked.” (1965, p. 148). Not the missing moment, but a moment that has two parts. The “I AM” moment and the moment that surrounds and contains this moment and so makes it bearable: the moment of human holding and community that allows the “I” to be. It begins when we are infants, but continues from cradle to grave, those two cultural artifacts of holding. For adults, cultural forms such as literature, poetry, music, and film take on this holding function, containing the individual so that he or she does not feel infinitely exposed when confronted with a world not made for the human being (Winnicott, 1986, p. 36).

The narrative self is not the self entire. It rests or is embedded in the memory experience of relationships that are prior to language. They can never be articulated very well, but they can be categorized in retrospect with terms such as, “I feel held in a fleshy human web.” The opposite would be, “I’m afraid that if I don’t pay attention to everything all the time I’m going to fall out of the world.” While it’s unlikely that anyone ever expressed their insecurity in just these words, they capture a pre-verbal insecurity of being.

The narrative self is a superstructure, built upon and reflecting pre-verbal relationships. Real relationships can change the narrative self, as the narrative self can change real relationships. But the narrative self refers not only to other narrative selves (though it refers to these too), but to actual pre-verbal relationships. Contra Thiele and Damasio, these relationships are not just intrapsychic, but interpsychic, beginning at birth. They can be overwhelmed by later experiences, such as extreme trauma, but they have remarkable staying power. Recovery depends on the ability to use others to reach back to these earliest pre-verbal relationships in order to restore a secure holding environment, a safe place.

Connolly’s position is similar to Thiele’s, in so far as he continually asserts that narrative is always a moment too late. Any attempt to capture the “layered play of affect” that marks the materiality of thought must be radically incomplete (Connolly, 2002, p. 107). Each of Connolly’s many examples of how one might use everyday techniques to alter one’s thinking (drinking more wine, introducing full spectrum lighting to your house, meditation, uttering unconventional views) focuses strictly on the individual from the inside out (2002, pp. 101-103). One might utter unconventional views in order to discover the effect of doing so on the deeper levels of one’s psyche,

what Connolly refers to as “the lower layers of your intrasubjectivity.” But one would never do so in order to engage with a community of others.

This does not tell us how Connolly stands on the question of whether intrapsychic development begins with interpsychic development. However, Connolly’s frequent reference to Damasio, particularly Damasio’s emphasis on the speed with which the brain outruns the conscious mind in making everyday decisions, suggests that Connolly too would follow Damasio all the way down (Connolly, 2002, pp. 33-35; Damasio, 2000, pp. 160-161). Nothing in Connolly’s work points in the other direction. Thiele’s interest in cognitive development only reinforces what is already apparent about the limits of the neuroscientific approach to moral and political theory: the difficulty it finds going beyond its implicit organizing assumption of neurological individualism, however artful this individual may be, however liberated in his or her own body.

For Connolly et al., the unconscious becomes virtually physical (the meaning of affect), and in this mode it is unavailable to the conscious mind. For Freud, the unconscious experience is layered, as subsequent experiences and memories overlaid the original experience, so that there was no single original experience to uncover, but sedimented layers of experience (*Nachträglichkeit*). For Connolly, psychological sedimentation has disappeared. In this sense, Connolly has not only materialized the unconscious, but rendered it physical. To be sure, there is a physical unconscious, expressed for example in somatization. But somatization does not exhaust the unconscious.

Conclusion

The slowness of consciousness, compared to what Connolly (2002, 27) calls “infraperception,” perception at the speed of the unconscious mind, is seen by Connolly et al. as the source of both self-deception and liberation.

We do not deny that pressures and directives flooding into consciousness from the infrasensible field often feel as if they express “the apodictically certain fact of pure reason”; we simply contest the conclusion that such a recognition actually does express “the objective reality of the moral law itself.” To us nature is more diverse and interesting than any god, and the body is more layered, rich, and creative than the soul. (Connolly, 2002, p. 86)

Consciousness is simply too slow to keep up with the impinging world. For Connolly, these impingements from nature and body help recreate the liminal self, almost as though it were an artistic project. If they are too frequent and severe, these impingements destroy the narrative self. What accounts for the difference? Perhaps it’s simply a matter of luck. Is one fortunate enough to live in a world in which one’s consciousness is outrun by forces that promote creative change. Or is one’s consciousness outrun by natural and human sources of unbearable intrusion?

In overwhelmed consciousness the continuity of the self is lost, broken. For Connolly et al., this is good. For Connolly et al., the experience Winnicott called

“going-on-being,” creates a narrative self that imprisons. Connolly rejects a view of the self as having a pre-linguistic birth place (constructed out of the neuronal representations, misrepresentations, and fabrications) based on actual relationships on which the self may fall back, especially when it is therapeutically helped to do so by attempts to duplicate, in so far as is possible, such relationships. The duplication of these relationships in an environment appropriate for adults would be a community.

Connolly has no place for community. One hopes that therapeutic communities would address Connolly’s rituals and intersubjective arts of self-transformation, but they wouldn’t. Nothing like this is on his list of twenty-one techniques by which “thinking is altered in its direction, speech, intensity, or sensibility” (2002, 100-103). For Connolly, working on the self is a private affair.

For Connolly, the self is a narrative construction, entering into consciousness long after an experience is over (at least in neuronal time), in order to provide fictional continuity. What neuroscience could bring is an appreciation of the pre-linguistic. The trouble is, the pre-linguistic becomes strictly individualistic, as it does in Damasio. This is not essential to an empirical approach that takes neuroscience seriously. It is an attribute of one in which the unit of analysis remains the silent self. Only when this self begins to be conceived as pre-linguistically constituted in its relationships with others, as Stern, Segal, and Winnicott suggest, does freedom acquire its essential quality, its location between self and world. The “I AM” moment becomes possible, as it is contained by a community of others. This community is the proper subject of political theory. This includes community writ large, such as society, culture, and nation. All may hold us at various times, and when they do, they all partake of community.

It is this “I AM” moment that is the beginning of mature autonomy, what Kant called *Mündigkeit*. Should this “I AM” moment not occur, should it be blocked by a bad upbringing, including the failure of community, then it is properly the subject of psychoanalysis or politics, depending on the scale of the failure.

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