

8 Beyond secularism

Immanence and transcendence in the political thought of William E. Connolly

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Introduction

A distinctive feature of William Connolly's political philosophy is its disclosure of flows of life and possibilities of becoming in the seemingly inert spaces between identity and difference, private and public, secular and religious, hidden and manifest. For Connolly, life overflows and invests these attempts to organise our existence. The task of the philosopher, he suggests, is not that of regulating and constraining life, but rather striving to grasp its protean character, its endless dynamics of transformation and reproduction, aware that 'being exceeds every interpretation' (Connolly, 2002a: xi). Connolly's philosophy thus unravels alternatives to contemporary forms of being, dissects the inner conceits of identity and, most of all, unveils the anti-pluralist character of seemingly natural political dispositions that marginalise minority subjectivities and force them to adapt to hegemonic/authoritative forms.

This chapter explores Connolly's critique of one such authoritative form: secularism. The distinctiveness of Connolly's approach to secularism does not rest on a sweeping condemnation of the hegemony of the secular outlook, nor does it simplify it into a multicultural appeal for peaceful coexistence between secular and religious perspectives. More radically, Connolly maintains the necessity of rethinking secularism in its limits, conceits and ontological assumptions (particularly the very possibility of a clear-cut distinction between religious and secular) in a broader context of identity formation and ethical engagement with deep-seated sensitivities. Connolly's call for a 'refashioning of secularism' (Connolly, 1999b: 19) is thus an integral part of his overall political philosophy of immanent pluralism. Accordingly, this chapter strives to illuminate the main tenets of Connolly's narrative (beyond an exclusive focus on *Why I Am Not a Secularist*) within which the role and relevance of his critique of secularism may better be appreciated.

In order to reconstruct this narrative, two main arguments are put forward. First, Connolly's philosophy can be read as an attempt to address some of the tensions of modern thought highlighted by Michel Foucault in his analysis of the transformation of the modern episteme into an 'analytic of finitude' – and in particular, of how the relocation of authority from the transcendence of

God to the immanence of Man that characterises the emergence of the modern subject, is paralleled by the ascendancy of an understanding of ethics as an authoritative mechanism of transcendental regulation that disparages uncertainty, cultivation and spiritual self-transformation as moral resources. Second, taking the relocation of authority from God to Man as a crucial dimension of secularism, I suggest that Foucault's account of the 'analytic of finitude' can be read as a philosophical description of the modern process of secularisation.

The chapter then explores Connolly's challenge to the constraining and anti-pluralist aspects of secularism by looking at how his philosophy strives to overcome the tensions of the 'analytic of finitude'. The main thesis advanced is that these tensions are prompted by an unfinished process of secularisation, with authority still partially located in a realm *beyond* the subject, namely the Kantian transcendental. Connolly's project can therefore be described as the attempt to locate all sources of authority and morality *within* the subject by pushing the process of secularisation to a stage where life, ethics and becoming may be experienced on a pure plane of immanence. Connolly, in sum, strives to pursue pluralism by 'rewriting' the transcendent(al) into the immanent.

The argument begins with a reading of Foucault's 'analytic of finitude' as a philosophical account of the modern process of secularisation, and is followed by a discussion of how the main tenets of Connolly's philosophy can be interpreted as a response to some of Foucault's concerns. Connolly's critique of secularism, it will be shown, targets a wider set of dispositions than those encompassed by secularism and eventually emerges as a critique of those philosophies – secular-humanistic, theistic, or a combination of both – which claim authority on the ground of transcendence, be it the expression of a theological order or of an abstract reason capable of mediating between (hence to *transcend*) conflicting world-views.

The chapter then assesses Connolly's success in breaking with (some of) the tensions of the modern episteme by placing Connolly in conversation with Jürgen Habermas. The entanglement of the German philosopher in the 'analytic of finitude' negatively affects his capacity to foster a genuine pluralism and offers a clearer sense of the strength of Connolly's argument. However, a more detailed examination of the unintended and unsolicited dimensions of the process of secularisation shows how some of the weaknesses that may be attributed to Habermas can actually be attributed to Connolly. The latter, in particular, fails to justify and accommodate the advocacy of seemingly transcendent(al) 'civilisational limits' in his philosophy of immanence. This argument raises doubts over the very possibility that the transcendent(al) may be rewritten into the immanent and asks whether it must be an essential component of political imagination and, as such, also central to Connolly's view immanent pluralism. The chapter concludes with a modest subversion of Connolly's approach which places the possibility of pluralism not in an unattainable translation of the transcendent(al) into the immanent but in the recognition of its very centrality to seemingly conflicting religious and secular perspectives.

Foucault and the ‘analytic of finitude’

According to Alain Renaut (1997), the emergence of the subject of the modern episteme is characterised by the attempt to gain independence from God, Divine Law or Tradition as sources of external normativity and to relocate the foundations of authority and morality in the individual. This shift, however, prompted the question of how, given the immanence and finitude that define subjectivity, the transcendent character of social norms could be validated without any reference to a transcendent religious order.

For Michel Foucault, the possibility of an immanent validation is opened by Kant’s philosophical revolution. Foucault (1970) associates the appearance of the modern episteme with a deep mutation in the understanding of knowledge. In the classical age, knowledge was conceived as a transparent relation between being and representation and thus man had no role other than to identify the correspondences between language and objects. Once the idea of a God-given order begins to crumble, however, the notion of such an identity becomes increasingly untenable. As language emerges as a human creation, detached from the sacred order of being, Man is no longer the exterior observer of an externally given order. Modernity thus witnesses the emergence of Man as a ‘historical/transcendental doublet’ (ibid.: 303–343): Man becomes at once, and for the first time, object of knowledge within the order of things, but also a transcendental source of that very order. For Foucault, the condition of possibility which allows Man to be both empirical and transcendental substance rests on what he calls the ‘analytic of finitude’.

With Kant, knowledge as an *analysis of representations* (possible by virtue of the correspondence between language and objects) transmutes into knowledge as an *analytic of representations*, namely ‘the attempt to show on what grounds representation and analysis of representations are possible and to what extent they are legitimate’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 28). This analytic completely overturns the meaning and implication of man’s finite being. Human finitude, rather than appearing as a hindrance to the possibility of knowledge, becomes its condition of existence. For Foucault (1970: 315):

[T]he limitation [of Man] is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man from outside (because he has a nature or a history), but as a fundamental finitude, which rests on nothing but its own existence as a fact, and opens up the positivities of all concrete limitation.

In other words, man’s finitude is the condition of possibility for a knowledge which is by definition limited as its condition of existence is entirely contained in the finitude of Man.

This crucial configuration of modern thought, Foucault maintains, is fundamentally unstable as it generates a constant tension between ‘the transcendental and the empirical’, ‘the cogito and the unthought’, ‘the return to the origins and the impossibility to grasp them’ (ibid.: 318–335). As Dreyfus

and Rabinow explain, this tension rests on the fact that man is conceived at once:

(1) as a fact among other facts to be studied empirically, and yet as the transcendental condition of the possibility of all knowledge; (2) as surrounded by what he cannot get clear about (the unthought), and yet as a potentially lucid cogito, source of all intelligibility; and (3) as the product of a long history whose beginning he can never reach and yet, paradoxically, as the source of that very history.

(Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 30)

The ethical translation of this unstable epistemological formation is a notion of moral action as ‘principled autonomy’ (O’Neill, 2002: 83–86), whereby subjective freedom meets objective moral law thanks to the existence of *a priori*, *universal* and *transcendental* cognitive faculties. As Armando Salvatore (1997: 30) suggests, ‘[t]he result of this subtle, and indeed fragile, solution was the ambiguous invention of a matrix of morality that is immanent in the subject but accords with the rules of transcendence; hence it is not transcendent, but “transcendental”.’ Kant’s introduction of the ‘transcendental’ thus emerges as a crucial step in a process of secularisation understood as the relocation of authority from the transcendence of God to the immanence of Man. Although crucial, however, this step is far from being decisive because, Salvatore (1997: 30) remarks, Kant’s delicate construction cannot really escape a reference to a realm *beyond* the subject. It is thus in this context of not fully accomplished secularisation, with the sources of authority and morality lying halfway between ‘within’ and ‘beyond’, that the frantic condition of the modern subject, split between the empirical immanent and the transcendental, acquires a special salience. This condition, which Connolly pictures as ‘the compulsion to clarify opaque elements in its desire, perception and judgment by converting itself into an object of inquiry’ (Connolly, 1995: 11) appears in fact to shape three important tendencies.

First, in the attempt to reduce the shadows that haunt its existence but assuming itself to be the very master of those shadows, the subject of the modern episteme deploys a whole set of transcendental arguments (regulative ideals, forms of command morality, universalisms) to bind the empirical immanent to the transcendental, the fluctuation and unpredictability of the former to the reassuring ‘stability beyond reach’ of the latter. A characteristic of the modern episteme is thus the attempt to draw ‘the double into the fold of the subject’ (ibid.: 12). This endeavour is a direct consequence of the structure of the analytic of finitude, concerned as it is ‘with showing how the Other, the Distant, is also the Near and the Same’ (Foucault, 1970: 339).

The implication is that the modern episteme is crucially concerned with bringing difference to identity by denying difference a dimension of authenticity. Foucault vividly explores this argument through his studies of madness, sexuality, imprisonment and punishment. Difference, in this account, is not

variation, but *deviation* from a common and transcendental substance. Moreover, once this *a priori* substance is presupposed, and thus once human beings are considered, as in the Kantian model, *already* endowed with those moral attributes which enable them to comply with the transcendental ideal, the notion that a spiritual transformation of the self may be required in order to be able to know the other appears redundant. Within this perspective, the distance between the self and the other, between identity and difference, solidifies and becomes an exclusive responsibility of the other, unable to comply with a common, transcendentially identified, rule of being.

This argument leads to the third central characteristic of the modern episteme: the separation between philosophy/knowledge and spirituality/ethics. According to Foucault, this separation begins with Descartes who marks the emergence of the ‘detached knowing subject with a corresponding domain of objectively representable and knowable objects’ (Han, 2005: 188). Although Kant complicates this picture by transforming the knowing subject into a transcendental subject and showing that the possibility of knowledge ‘is itself dependent on transcendental conditions which alone can open up the realm of experience’, his transcendental subject, endowed with ‘a priori’ ideas, reinforces the Cartesian ‘epistemologisation’ of philosophy (ibid.: 198). The separation between knowledge and spirituality engendered by the modern episteme paves the way for a central contradiction of modernity in which the indefinite progress of knowledge fails to translate into improvements of the moral condition. Max Weber’s account of modern subjectivity as an ‘iron cage’ in which meaning and knowledge exist in a state of tension (Turner, 1996: 85) is emblematic of the fact that truth ‘such as it is [in the modern episteme] ... can no longer save the subject’ (Foucault, quoted in Han, 2005: 196).

Connolly and the ‘analytic of finitude’

The political philosophy of William Connolly can best be understood as a response to this set of issues raised by Foucault. Connolly sees the transcendental as a form of political and ethical argument that tends to foreclose the possibility of political contestation; as the conceptual apparatus of legitimation employed by majority constituencies to justify their occupation of the authoritative moral centre and force minorities to adapt to that centre (Connolly, 1995: 15; 1999b: 6, 154). In this respect, Connolly deems Foucault’s genealogical approach remarkable in alerting us to the ‘constructed character of contemporary formations of self, morality, convention, rationality’, and in thus disclosing the contingent character of argumentations which seek legitimation in transcendental presumptions ‘prior to ethically informed action’ (Connolly, 1995: 29). At the same time, he considers Foucault’s perspective insufficient for dispelling transcendental presumptions because it is based on a detachment almost impossible to achieve and which risks collapsing into forms of cynicism and disenchantment (Connolly 1995:

35, 1999b: 14) reminiscent of Weberian modernity. For these reasons, Connolly does not base his challenge to the transcendental solely on a strategy of detachment, but also on a parallel strategy of attachment. The core of his approach rests on the acknowledgement that:

your implicit projections surely exceed your explicit formulations of them and that your formulations exceed your capacity to demonstrate their truth. You challenge closure ... by affirming the contestable character of your own projections, by offering readings of contemporary life that compete with alternative accounts, and by moving back and forth between these two levels.

(Connolly, 1995: 36)

This 'relational art of the self' needs to be matched by a 'generous ethos of political engagement' based on the reciprocal willingness to accept the contestability of one's own transcendental beliefs (Connolly, 1999b: 143 and ff.). The aim, Connolly explains, is to activate a general ethos of forbearance and critical responsiveness among constituencies that honour different moral sources (ibid.: 39). In order to expose this possibility, Connolly valorises uncertainty, cultivation, lived experience and practice as chief ethical virtues to be experienced on a pure plane of immanence which stands clear of *a priori* ethical assumptions. To this scope, he challenges the very kernel of the 'analytic of finitude' – the ambivalent condition of the modern subject, conceived at once as immanent and transcendental substance – by subverting the terms of the Kantian argument. Hence, instead of regarding the immanent and the transcendental as properties of a universal human substance, Connolly maintains, drawing on Spinoza and Deleuze, that a universal human substance can only be experienced in immanence (see Wenman, 2007: 7–8). The core of this subversion is the reconceptualisation of a resource whose status in Foucault is notoriously controversial: the body.

In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Foucault introduces us to a body 'totally imprinted by history ... moulded by a great many distinct regimes' and thus primarily conceived as 'a surface for the inscription of social order, a material substratum for the application ... of power' (Foucault, 1984: 83; Levin, 2001: 5). According to Judith Butler (1989), however, this understanding overlooks how Foucault's latent references to an ontological pre-discursivity of the body would envisage in the latter 'a dynamic locus of resistance to culture per se'. Although Foucault overtly denies an 'ontological independence of the body' outside culture and discourse, for Butler (ibid.: 602),

[H]is theory nevertheless relies on a notion of genealogy, appropriated from Nietzsche, which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean 'forces' that are, indeed, repressed and transmuted by a mechanism of cultural construction external to that body.

Connolly vigorously embraces this perspective. Turning Foucault's claim that 'the soul is the prison of the body' (ibid.: 606) into the more affirmative image of a body 'more layered, rich and creative than the soul' (Connolly, 2002a: 85), Connolly identifies in the transcendental the external dimension of authority that inscribes a hegemonic order onto the body. However, he also considers the body a reservoir of immanent forces of resistance in the form of thought-imbued intensities operating below the threshold of rational awareness, and therefore not always susceptible to reasoned translation.

Connolly plays down the extent to which this immanent space of 'protean infrasensible and layered sensibility' (Connolly, 1999b: 13) is the locus of the process Norbert Elias, Max Weber and Michel Foucault identified as 'internalisation of external constraints', 'iron cage', and 'bio-power' (Elias, 2000; Szakolczai, 1998; Turner, 1996). On the contrary, for Connolly, the existence of this infrasensible space calls into question the very possibility that ethics may be transcendently secured and thus vindicated by justification through necessity. The presence of this space shows in fact that there is more to thinking and politics than can be grasped and interpreted by those perspectives that claim authority on the ground of transcendence, be it the expression of theistic faith or abstract universal reason. The latter, in fact, does not represent an effective advancement on the route to a relocation of authority from God to Man. Entangled in the 'analytic of finitude', Kantian forms of reason just shift their faith from a transcendent cosmological order to various forms of command morality, rational agreement, or deliberative consensus (Connolly, 2006b: 79). The apparent immanence of these accounts, however, is not 'in itself' as it ambiguously continues to accord with, and therefore is dependent on the *a priori* rules of transcendence (Deleuze, 1997; Salvatore, 1997: 30; Wenman, 2007).

Starting from a conception of the body as a site of articulation of experimental strategies, a 'micropolitics' aimed at modifying the 'infrasensible register of subjectivities and intersubjectivities' (Connolly, 1999b: 183) in the direction of a generous dimension of pluralism and engagement, Connolly strives to overcome the modern Kantian tension between the empirical and the transcendental by conceiving these dimensions of life as expressions of the same plane of immanence. In this perspective, the body does not speak an apodictic truth, but is part of a complex formation Connolly labels the 'body/brain/culture network' (Connolly, 2002a; 2005; 2006a). Within this immanent formation, he suggests, rational argumentation takes place together with layers of undetected sensitivities, the result of both our bodily dispositions and collective attachments which are expressions of religious and secular faiths. Thus, Connolly's philosophy of immanence neither disregards reason, nor faith and, as we shall see in greater depth in the next section, nor does it conceive these two dimensions in antinomic terms. However, against a transcendental ethics that vindicates authority by appealing to a realm *beyond* the subject, Connolly opposes a more complex and unstable attunement between abstract reasoning, bodily inclinations and communal religious or secular identifications.

This perspective, which poses as its highest goal the achievement of pluralism, inevitably calls the modern subject to confront her transcendental beliefs and opens the way for a disquieting flow of becoming which threatens already established normative assumptions. Connolly, however, does not consider this a reason for despair or nihilism, but rather views it as the very possibility for a spiritual transformation of the self which, founded upon an ethos of attachment and cultivation, might re-instil meaning in a world whose disenchantment is to be found in the very coldness, rigidity and distance of an ethics of transcendently secured rules (Connolly, 1995: 29). With the inscription of the empirical and the transcendental in the immanent, Connolly strives to escort us out of the aporia of the 'analytic of finitude' by advancing the Kantian unfinished process of secularisation to a new level: there where life, ethics and authority may be experienced on a pure plane of immanence.

The transcendent(al) conceits of secularism

Against this background, Connolly's critique of secularism as an important hegemonic formation can be better grasped. Connolly, in fact, does not question the project of relocation of authority and morality from the transcendence of God to the immanence of Man that characterises secularisation. On the contrary, he questions contemporary expressions of secularism for not being, as it were, secular enough, that is to say, for still relying on a conceptualisation of the subject divided between the empirical and the transcendental. This approach, he suggests, encourages an understanding of ethics as authoritative mechanisms of transcendental regulation that disparage uncertainty, cultivation and spiritual self-transformation as moral resources.

According to Connolly (1999b: 20–21), the hegemonic authority of secularism is based on the universalisation of a specifically Western (and more specifically European) experience of emancipation from religious conflicts and oppression which considers the privatisation of religious belief as a necessary condition of modernity and pluralism.¹ Organising the public sphere into a space of rational communication purged of any sign of embodied religious emotion, secularism operates with the presumption that 'argument, rationality, language or conscious thought' can be insulated from 'visceral intensities of thinking, prejudice, and sensibility' (ibid.: 36). Secularism, therefore, is an expression of a transcendental ethics that, in order to provide an unequivocal set of ethical dispositions, sacrifices a whole series of 'complex registers of persuasion, judgment, and discourse operative in public life' which operate at the emotional level and below the level of rational awareness (ibid.: 20).

The alleged 'political purity' of secularism, therefore, conceals an ambiguity since some of the registers it claims to suppress 'continue to operate ... below the threshold of appreciation by secularists' (ibid.: 163, 20). The registers Connolly refers to are specifically those grounded in Christian sensibilities.

The result is that while secularism claims authority in the name of a public realm devoid of religious accretions and on the grounds of its supposed neutrality and capacity to *transcend* competing faiths,

that realm remains safe for Christianity as long as the unconscious mores that *organize* public reason, morality and politics are Christian. Christianity does not need to be invoked that often because it is already inscribed in the prediscursive dispositions and cultural instincts of the civilization.

(ibid.: 24)

For Connolly, the transcendental conceits of secularism appear particularly evident in the multicultural context of Europe where Muslims have increasingly become perceived as a source of disturbance within a carefully guarded configuration of authority resting on secular/Christian sensibilities (Connolly, 2006b). The negative perception and stigmatisation of Islam in Europe are the result of a general limit of the mainstream European ideological mindset which understands religion as a universal category pertaining only to metaphysical experience. This reduces religion to the otherworldly; to a cognitive framework which neglects how much religions may, in Talal Asad's words be 'practical mode[s] of living ... [and] techniques for teaching body and mind to cultivate specific virtues and abilities that have been authorised, passed on and reformulated down the generations' (quoted in Connolly, 2006b: 76). The cognitive understanding of religion, Connolly remarks,

resides in the demand, growing out of the Christian Enlightenment, to disconnect the expression of religious belief from participation in embodied practices, so that it becomes possible to imagine a world in which everyone is a citizen because belief is relegated to the private realm and the interior self.

(ibid.: 78)

According to Connolly, it is the transcendental ethics of secularism, 'deeply established in the unconscious of the European culture' (2006b: 75), which makes Europe: (1) unable to engage with the more ritualistic and embodied practices of Islamic religiosity;² (2) unable to recognise the extent to which dimensions of the European secular realm are shaped by Christian sensibilities; and (3) unable to foster an ethos of cultivation and public engagement conducive to more genuine dimensions of pluralism. From this perspective, secularism can be considered on a par with theistic faiths. Whereas the latter affirm certitude in the name of an order of being dictated by a transcendent God, the former does the same in response to the fear, resentment and sense of empowerment stemming from the belief in the absence of a divine order (Connolly, 2002a; 2002b; 2005). Secularism is thus a prominent expression of the attempt to cope with the tensions of the analytic of finitude: it reinstates

ethical certainty by binding the fluidity, unpredictability and plurality of life to a set of transcendental assumptions which demand religion be contained in the private closet; it reduces difference to identity by postulating that the universal and correct mode of religious experience is disembodied and cognitive; it transmutes religion, once conceived as a virtue, into a purely epistemological perspective (on this latter point, see Asad, 2003: 38–39, quoted in Connolly, 2006b: 77), thus dragging it into the same space that the modern episteme has reserved for knowledge: a space unable to have a bearing upon the improvement of the moral condition.

The secularism questioned by Connolly, however, is a social and political discourse that emerges from a conceptualisation of the subject as split between the empirical and the transcendental. It is therefore a secularism that has not yet fully relocated the sources of authority and morality from ‘beyond’ to ‘within’. For this reason, Connolly maintains, this kind of secularism, like theism and any other doctrines based on transcendent(al) presumptions, cannot be taken as a central authoritative principle around which other perspectives must revolve, as it would inevitably hinder the possibility of a generous pluralism. For Connolly, we must translate the ‘transcendental field into a layered immanent field’ (2002a: 85), scaling down secularist and theistic perspectives into ‘existential faiths’, that is, ‘a creed or a philosophy *plus* the sensibility that infuses it’ (Connolly, 2006c: 285, emphasis mine). The aim is to work on the immanent level of sensibilities in order to disseminate a general virtue of forbearance and critical responsiveness across different faiths ‘inspired by a love of the world or attachment to the complexity of being that infuses it’ (Connolly, 2005: 116).

Connolly’s philosophy of immanence is thus the attempt to develop an ethics of lived experience and practice which may achieve independence from a transcendent(al) realm *beyond* the subject; an ethics that may engender the pluralisation of identities and the possibility of becoming for subjugated subjectivities too often curbed by the imposition of external forms such as secularism. It is the attempt to move beyond secularism by further advancing the process of secularisation along a pathway that considers the empirical and the transcendental not as two distinct dimensions of the same substance, but as expressions of the same universal substance that, however, can only be in immanence.

Habermas’s transcendental secularism and the limits of pluralism

Although Habermas has generally overlooked the constitutive role of religion in the public sphere by endorsing a model of dialogic interaction based upon secular rationality (Calhoun, 1992: 36; Zaret, 1992: 213), he has recently been refashioning his position. In his latest publications (Habermas, 2006; Habermas and Ratzinger, 2005; see also Nemoianu, 2006; Salvatore, 2006), prompted by the new political importance gained by religious traditions and communities, Habermas (2006: 1) has questioned the extent to which the ideal

of a common human reason as the epistemic justification for the secular state can demand that citizens with religious beliefs act in the public sphere as if they were devoid of any religious conviction. The problem, he argues, is that ‘many religious citizens would not be able to undertake such an artificial division within their own minds without jeopardizing their existence as pious persons’ (ibid.: 8). Moreover, should the secular state discourage religious persons and communities from expressing themselves politically, it would risk cutting ‘itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. Secular citizens or those of other religious persuasions can under certain circumstances learn something from religious contributions’ (ibid.: 10).

In order to make room for religious contributions in the public sphere, Habermas suggests we draw a line between the ‘informal public sphere’, where religious reason can flow unconstrained, and an ‘institutional public sphere’, where only secular reason counts (ibid.: 9). This separation means that for religious beliefs to have an institutional representation, they need to be ‘translated’ into a secular language. *Separation* and *translation* are for Habermas two essential requirements: separation to protect religious and cultural minorities; translation to allow the wider public – be it secular or of a different faith – to understand and subject religious arguments to rational scrutiny.

Aware that by adopting secularism as the ‘official language’ of the public sphere, he may be restating its moral supremacy and relegating to the margins the religious sensibilities he wants to empower, Habermas introduces the notion of ‘cooperative cognitive effort’ to establish a dimension of equality in reciprocity. Secular citizens should strive to identify the truth in the statements of religious citizens and help them in the process of translation. Religious citizens should respect ‘the precedence of secular reason and the institutional translation requirement’ (ibid.: 15). Reciprocity demands religious consciousness be willing to question its assumptions and secular consciousness willing to recognise that religious argumentations may contain rational arguments (ibid.: 19).

A Connollian reading of these brief excerpts raises scepticism about the pluralist credentials of Habermas’ account. Although Habermas seems, initially, to abandon the fiction of a neutral secular public sphere, he concludes with its vindication. Through mechanisms of containment – *separation* between ‘informal’ and ‘institutional public sphere’ and *translation* from religious to secular – he constructs a purified political space in which religious sensibilities can find a place only by conforming to the transcendental ethical standard of secularism. *Separation* and *translation* reproduce the Kantian split between the empirical and the transcendental and the idea that the former has to act in accordance with the rules of the latter (note how Habermas’ account is the mirror image of Connolly’s: whereas Habermas separates the empirical and transcendental and translates the former into the latter, Connolly strives to overcome this separation and proposes to translate the transcendental into the immanent). Habermas thus poses secularism as the epistemic foundation and authoritative centre of the liberal state and brings difference to identity by decoding religious consciousness through secular assumptions.

This perspective is crucially based on an understanding of secularism and religion as two predetermined ethical codes that exhaust and contain the range of possibilities of being. According to Talal Asad, a perspective (such as that of Habermas) that considers religion as an ‘analytically identifiable category’ is a function of ‘the liberal demand in our time that it [religion] be kept quite separate from politics, law and science – spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life’ (Asad, 1993: 28). From the perspective of the analytic of finitude, this demand can be interpreted as the attempt to affirm human sovereignty over a space no longer considered the expression of a God-given order. This affirmation, as we have seen, requires the clarification of opaque elements in human experience through their conversion into objects of knowledge. The objectification and essentialisation of religion in a cognitive perspective concerned with the otherworldly are therefore expressive of the modern episteme as is Habermas’s approach: he confines religion to the margins in order to dispel the threatening idea that the public sphere may be ruled by forces other than that of human reason. This perspective takes the secular narrative (the conversion of codes of Divine Grace into Reason) characteristic of Western modernity (see Salvatore, 1997: 27) as unambiguous in having fostered a clear demarcation between religious and secular space and, accordingly, envisages in the latter the possibility of an ethics grounded in secular rationality.

Connolly and Asad see the modern differentiation between the secular and the religious as much more blurred. Asad argues against the possibility of identifying religion in its essence, ‘not only because its constituent elements are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes’ (Asad, 1993: 29). Connolly, as we have seen, distinguishes immanent and transcendental ethics, the latter encompassing all those perspectives that, by appealing to ‘transcendental arguments prior to ethically informed action’ (Connolly, 1995: 29), foreclose the terms of political contestation and the possibility of becoming. For Connolly, then, the important differentiation is not between supposedly secular and religious perspectives but between philosophies such as those of Kant and Habermas that, although nominally secular, still appeal to a transcendental dimension and thus propound an understanding of ethics as compliance with a set of rules defined *a priori*, and philosophies that draw on an immanent set of resources – like the ‘Deleuzian metaphysics of a protean infrasensible and layered sensibility’ (Connolly, 1999b: 13) – that, in a Spinozian fashion, interpret ethics ‘as cultivation by tactical means of *hilaritus*, a love for life that infuses the body/brain/culture network in which we move and live’ (Connolly, 2006a: 84).

In Connolly’s philosophy of immanence, then, what matters is not which transcendent(al) perspective you endorse (theistic, secular, a mix of them), but the extent to which you supplement it with generous, immanent sensibilities of inclusion (Connolly, 2005: 48; 2006b: 285). Connolly’s critique of secularism is thus significantly different from Habermas’s. Where the latter confines

himself to softening the harsher aspects of secularism without challenging its moral primacy, Connolly makes secularism a perspective among others. The pluralisation of perspectives becomes the expression of a world of minorities engaged by an ethos of agonistic confrontation and critical responsiveness. The aim is to favour the emergence of new identities/sensibilities, an event that Habermas at the very least seems to disregard. The dialogic engagement he advocates, in fact, does not challenge the moral primacy of a transcendental secular reason. The Kantian subject, split between the empirical and the transcendental, thus reappears in the Habermasian subject committed to dialogic engagement but also pledging an unshakeable allegiance to the epistemic centrality of secularism. And like Kant, Habermas does not seem capable of escaping from reliance on a domain *beyond* the subject that, as Connolly remarks, becomes appropriated by majority constituencies to justify their necessary occupation of the authoritative moral centre and to force minorities to adapt to it.

Connolly's immanence and the problem of limits

Although, *prima facie*, Connolly's perspective appears more capable of devising a genuine ethos of pluralisation, a more encompassing evaluation of Habermas' account needs to take into account some of the concerns that animate it. We need to return to the question of the transformation of the modern episteme into an 'analytic of finitude' and elaborate further on an element that has been only alluded to: the structural (as opposed to agency-led) process of relocation of the sources of authority and morality from the transcendence of God to the immanence of Man.

This process, in fact, was not just the manifestation of a 'will to truth' of the fledging modern subject, but also the more practical response to the social collapse of the idea of a God-given order resulting from long-term processes such as the Protestant Reformation, the emergence of modern nation-states, the spread of capitalism and the modern scientific revolution (on the effect of these developments on the process of secularisation see Casanova, 1994: 21–25). The collapse of Christianity as a system of truth posed not just the problem of knowledge highlighted by Foucault, but also a question of a 'breakdown of connections', the importance of which is signalled by the nineteenth-century emergence of sociology, a 'science of society' concerned, from its Durkheimian inception, with the exploration of the social bonds that held and may hold human beings together (Mazlish, 1989; Turner, 1991). At the turn of the nineteenth century, then, the modern subject appears to be caught in a contradiction: Christianity as a system of truth is collapsing, but with the collapse of Christianity, the cohesion of the social fabric seems also to be in danger (Turner, 1991: 38).

These brief remarks do not do justice to the sheer complexity of the issues at stake but may help us to appreciate some aspects of Habermas's account. From this angle, Habermas' defence of secularism as the epistemic foundation

of modern multicultural societies can be interpreted as the attempt to strike a balance between the possibility of pluralism and the preservation of the social fabric. Its crumbling connections, in fact, foresee not just the loss of community but also the reinvigoration of hegemonic formations that, in the name of community, may enforce authoritative rules which disparage minority prerogatives. This argument raises the question of how Connolly addresses the tension between ‘pluralisation’ and ‘loss of cohesion’ and the ensuing possibility that, in the absence of common epistemic (transcendent) foundations, hegemonic formations may gain strength.

Initially, Connolly seems to reject the very antinomic terms in which the problem is cast. He states that identifying ‘extensive cultural *diversification* with the loss of cultural *connections* ... misrecognizes the interdependence between identity and difference’ (Connolly, 1995: 196, emphasis in original). However, he admits (*ibid.*: 194), ‘the cultural conditions of possibility for the politics of pluralization also create temptations for the politics of fundamentalization’. This possibility, together with the necessity of defending ‘general *civilizational values*’ such as ‘protection of life, respect for privacy, the appreciation of diversity, protection from undeserved suffering’ demand that limits to pluralisation be established (*ibid.*: 194; emphasis mine). This advocacy of ‘civilizational limits’ (*ibid.*: 196) has been reiterated in Connolly’s recent writings where he has argued that ‘every political regime must set limits and seek to secure them through education and discipline’ also because ‘it is impossible to house every possible mode of diversity in the same regime at the same time’ (Connolly, 2005: 40–43). This strand of argument appears to sit uneasily with his philosophy of immanent pluralism. The limits he advocates, in fact, appear more the projection of a transcendent(al) order than the outcome of immanent forces.

To account for this apparent contradiction it is necessary to consider the relationship Connolly envisages between ethics of responsiveness and social order. According to Mark Wenman (2007: 9), Connolly’s idea of social regulation contemplates the ‘supposition that the various forces at play in the cosmos tend to coalesce spontaneously into “underdetermined” patterns of regularity’ and thus that social order ‘is somehow ... the spontaneous effect of the counterbalances and restraints of pluralist politics’ (on the presence of ‘spontaneous generous energies’ in Connolly’s account see also Asad, 2006: 224). Wenman attributes this perspective to Connolly’s embrace of the Spinozan/Deleuzian idea that life in its multiple expressions is the actualisation of the same immanent substance. This actualisation, he continues, has the effect of ‘rob[bing] social actors of their capacity for agency and critical intervention’ (Wenman, 2007: 10). This latter point, however, seems to be contradicted by an important analytic distinction Connolly (2005: 48; 2006c: 285) draws between ‘creeds/philosophies/faiths’ and ‘sensibilities’. What counts for an ethos of engagement and pluralism, Connolly argues, is almost independent from the secular or theistic faith (or creed, or philosophy) you embrace – the transcendent(al) field – which is generally an expression of forms of

dogmatism, but resides crucially in cultivation of generous sensibilities – the immanent ethics of practice that draws on an embodied/visceral register. Social agency thus emerges as the central dimension of an ethics of responsiveness that appropriates and reconfigures transcendental presumptions into immanent sensibilities.

This account is postulated on an almost instrumental understanding of the transcendental dimension, which appears ‘redundant’ once the process of critical appropriation has taken place. Yet this understanding is coherent with the overarching tension between immanence and transcendence from which Connolly’s ethical project takes its cue. This tension, in fact, metamorphoses into a whole set of antinomies – between dogmatism and sensibilities, reason and body, regulation and spontaneity – in a narrative structure that pictures the possibility of pluralisation as the permutation of the first entity into the second: the ‘transcendental field into a layered immanent field’, dogmatism into sensibilities, abstract reason into bodily dispositions, regulation into spontaneity. In the relationship Connolly sets between the ethic of responsiveness and social order, then, it is not agency that is sacrificed but the transcendent(al), which Connolly associates mostly with dogmatism, abstract reason and *a priori* regulation.

This ethical construction crucially rests on an interpretation of the process of relocation of authority from the transcendence of God to the immanence of Man as a manifestation of the ‘will to truth’ of the modern subject, and thus considers the tensions of the ‘analytic of finitude’ as the expression of an imperfect, still to accomplish, secularisation. What this account plays down, however, is the extent to which the relocation of authority from God to Man has *also* been the unintended and unsolicited result of structural processes. These processes, having undermined Christianity as a system of truth, may well constitute a favourable environment for the emergence of social forces aimed at the restoration of analogous systems of truth. Connolly, however, is reluctant to recognise an immanent authenticity to these forces. Having conceptualised the relocation of authority as an act of volition, he understands the Kantian transcendental as a temporary formation on the unfinished journey of secularisation and associates the transcendent(al) mostly with hegemonic/authoritative formations that disparage minorities and pluralism. By doing so, Connolly overlooks the possibility that the transcendent(al) may also be an important dimension of human experience *beyond* instrumental and primordial forms of reassurance; a dimension that may not be entirely subsumed in immanence; that helps shape political images of the good and thus, may be, the very force that, despite his emphasis on spontaneity and immanent sensibilities, leads Connolly to advocate limits in defence of civilisational values.

Escape and return to transcendence

How does the ethereal and protean notion of transcendence enter, unacknowledged and uninvited, in the relationship Connolly sets between limits

and civilisation? To address this question let us turn to a brief discussion on the origins and significance of transcendence as thematised by the Axial Age Theory in the concise account of Armando Salvatore (2007: 51–67; for a recent extensive assessment of this research programme see Arnason *et al.* 2005). As Salvatore remarks, the idea of transcendence unfolded as a momentous transformation across a number of civilisations in a period of about ten centuries, with its final manifestation in the *Qur'anic* revelation. The idea of a transcendent order beyond mundane life is a crucial feature of those processes of social differentiation and complexification which resulted in the progressive sedimentation of values and re-articulation of the social bond around a notion of connective justice *beyond* mythical views of the cosmos based on unfathomable patterns of cyclical repetition (Salvatore, 2007: 51).

The new discourse of transcendence, Salvatore maintains, is based on

a view of human agency as guided by a *telos* transcending particular situations and interactions. It is a *telos* directing practice towards a set of hierarchically ordered goals and goods, the highest ones being non-material goods and in particular goods of salvation, but also including the implementation of [divine] justice, which is inevitably rooted, in spite of its lofty status, in the daily connectivity of the *ego-alter* relationship.
(*ibid.*: 60)

Hence, with the appearance of transcendence, the mythical cosmology which oversees the *ego-alter* relation gives way to an *ego-alter/Alter* connection in which God-Alter is the epitome of a just order and, as such, becomes the ultimate source of authority, mediation and inspiration (*ibid.*: 55, 61). The stabilisation of the otherworldly around the idea of divine justice crucially translates in new forms of inworldly *reflexivity* that enable ‘human beings to reflect upon and to give expression to an image of the world as having the potential of being different from what it was perceived to be here and now’ (Bjorn Wittrock, quoted in Salvatore, 2007: 52). This process, of course, should be taken as neither a polarised and emphatic transition from a non-reflexive to a reflexive age, nor should it be understood in purely idealistic terms. The potential of transcendence, in fact, is the result of ‘ongoing socio-political and theological dialectics between orthodoxies and heterodoxies’ in a cyclical confrontation on the sanctity of boundaries (Salvatore, 2007: 55).

This very short summary on the emergence of transcendence in the Axial Age offers a valuable framework within which to analyse Connolly’s argument. To start with, transcendence enters Connolly’s relation between limits and civilisation in the form of non-negotiable principles of justice such as freedom from torture, punishment for murder, the right to an education, efficient public schooling and the reduction of the gap between rich and poor (Connolly, 2005: 43). These principles are what Connolly labels ‘civilisational values’, the crystallisation of certain notions of the ‘good’ which, he suggests,

a ‘political regime’ has the right to secure through ‘education and discipline’. These principles rest on an implicit element of transcendence not because they speak an *a priori* truth, but because they express a ‘transcendence-inspired’ sedimentation of values which has enacted a re-articulation of the social bond around a notion of connective justice. This argument of course holds if one subscribes to the framework of the Axial Age theory. However, even disputing the link this grand narrative sets between transcendence and civilisation, the connections it suggests between modes of social agency, connective justice and the idea of a transcendent just order *beyond* the subject appear very much reflected in Connolly’s philosophy.

Connolly’s political imagination is animated by a ‘nontheistic faith in the plurivocity of being’ (Connolly, 1999a: 8) inspired by a visceral gratitude for the abundance of life (Connolly, 2002b: 105; see also Connolly, 2002a: xix). This ‘Deleuzian belief in this world’ shapes an idea of the ‘good’ centred on the ‘pluralism of multiple minorities’. As Connolly explains, ‘The national image of a centred majority surrounded by minorities eventually becomes transfigured into an image of interdependent minorities ... contending and collaborating within a general ethos of forbearance and critical responsiveness’ (Connolly, 2005: 61; see also Connolly, 1996: 58). *Immanent* in this ‘image of the world’ is also its potentiality: a model of agonistic confrontation and selective collaboration among constituencies – that is, an ongoing dialectic between orthodoxies and heterodoxies on the nature, limits and sanctity of boundaries. Crucial for this process, Connolly suggests, is a reflexive social agency which appropriates and reconfigures transcendental presumptions into immanent sensibilities. With this move, Connolly curtails the transcendent source of axial reflexivity. Yet unlike post-Kantian philosophies, he does not locate new sources of reflexivity in secular reason (which he deems expressions of transcendental presumptions), but more radically turns to the visceral registers of embodied sensitivities. This approach, however, only nominally escapes transcendence. Connolly’s conceptualisation of the body, in fact, although part of a complex formation that encompasses reason and culture (the ‘body/brain/culture network’) is nonetheless endowed with Nietzschean ‘subterranean forces’, a reservoir of immanent sensitivities seemingly characterised by ontological prediscursivity.

Connolly’s ‘body’ thus resembles Kantian *a priori* cognitive faculties. On its transcendent character Connolly builds a philosophy of pluralism whose immanent status originates in the translation of authority and morality from the transcendent(al) into the immanent. This account thus strives to escort us out of the aporia of the ‘analytic of finitude’ by advancing the Kantian unfinished process of secularisation – and his transcendental reason – to a level where life, ethics and authority may be experienced on an embodied plane of immanence. This account, however, overlooks how the idea of a realm beyond the subject is not just a source of authoritative/hegemonic forces, but also of political imagination and thus, crucially, of possibilities of spiritual self-transformation. Political imagination acquires with transcendence

the ‘potential to transcend social and even cultural boundaries, and integrate new groups and social arrangements ... into the salvational path’ (Salvatore, 2007: 54). Certainly, transcendence in its salvational/redemptive thrust can also engender the imposition of authoritarian forms which deny pluralism (for an illustration, see Mavelli, 2008: 82–86). At the same time, however, transcendence appears also the very source of those inspired forces, like Connolly’s, which challenge anti-pluralist, hegemonic tendencies, indicating possibilities of becoming beyond seemingly natural political dispositions, beyond what is ‘here and now’.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Connolly’s critique of secularism is part of a wider project that questions the possibility that ethics may be grounded in *a priori* transcendent(al) presumptions. This project has been explored as an attempt to overcome the tensions of the ‘analytic of finitude’ by advancing the process of secularisation *beyond* Kant’s relocation of the sources of authority and morality from transcendence to the transcendental, from God to universal reason. Connolly thus performs a further relocation from reason to the deep sensitivities of the body, yet within a plastic formation that, guided by uncertainty and spiritual self-transformation as chief ethical virtues, invests all the way up, reason, belongings and beliefs in the search for an ever-changing attunement which may amplify the possibilities of becoming. Connolly pursues this task by recomposing the Kantian fracture between the empirical immanent and the transcendental through a translation of the transcendent(al) into the immanent. The main limit of this argument, however, is that it overlooks how the transcendent(al) may not be subsumed in immanence as it represents an essential source of political imagination from which Connolly himself draws inspiration.

This argument, however, neither warrants an endorsement of Habermas’ Kantian framework which downplays cultivation and self-transformation as chief ethical virtues and reinstates the authoritative primacy of secularism, nor the convicting of Connolly of a ‘performative contradiction’. Rather, in a Connollian spirit of agonistic confrontation and selective collaboration, the aim of this chapter has been that of employing his perspective as an imaginative springboard to explore ‘the dangers and possibilities [and limits] of deep, multidimensional pluralism in the late modern age’ (Connolly, 2006b: 92). Accordingly, an unexpected role for the transcendental emerged from this analysis: as a source of the protean character of life and not just of hegemonic/authoritative forces that deny that protean element; one that does not simply cast doubts on the possibility that life, ethics and becoming may be found solely in immanence, but more importantly raises the question of what its implications are for a philosophy of pluralism.

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed how Connolly’s challenge to the transcendental encompasses a central strategy of attachment. Connolly, in

fact, exposes the limits of Foucault's archaeological detachment and takes his claim that 'there is no way you can say there is no truth' as an indication of the fact that a strategy of detachment cannot, alone, reduce 'the transcendental to a residuum' (Connolly, 1995: 35–36). The discussion in this chapter, however, indicates that Connolly's 'attachment' may not be able to rid itself of that residuum either. This state of affairs invites us to consider an alternative reading of Foucault, one which takes his statement as a Connollian case of 'implicit projections exceeding explicit formulations' (ibid.: 36). According to this interpretation, Foucault may be interpreted as suggesting that the tensions of the 'analytic of finitude' lie beyond the specific configuration of the modern episteme and more fundamentally rest in a common human condition that cannot escape a projection into a realm beyond itself.

This argument finds support in the analysis articulated in this chapter and brings to the fore the idea that opportunities for pluralism may not lie in an (impossible?) advance of the Kantian process of secularisation advocated by Connolly. Rather, possibilities for a generous ethos of engagement and critical responsiveness may rest on the very recognition that whatever perspective we endorse, religious or secular, we are all united in a common search *beyond* ourselves. This search, however, does not preclude, but actually *demand*s the ethics of uncertainty, responsiveness and spiritual self-transformation envisaged by Connolly. And this is precisely because transcendence is not mere reassurance for our common dispersed condition or leeway for authoritative positions, but also a fundamental source of imagination, inspiration and enchantment for possibilities of life yet to be realised.

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Notes

- 1 Connolly maintains that several other stories could be told about the origins and legitimacy of secularism. However, this narrative of emancipation is central because it 'has become the dominant self-representation by secularists in several Western states. This story prevails largely because it paints the picture of a self-sufficient public realm fostering freedom and governance without a recourse to a specific religious faith' (Connolly, 1999b: 20–21).
- 2 Although Connolly does not explicitly make this point, it seems to me a central, underlying assumption of his discussion of Islam in Europe with the related critique of the Christian/secular demand to disconnect religious belief from embodied practices.

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