

An Ethos of Critical Responsiveness:

The role of late-modern contingency in William Connolly's theory of identity

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Introduction

William Connolly, in two of his excellent books, *Identity\Difference* and *The Ethos of Pluralization*, explores, broadly, the relationship between identity and politics. In *Identity\Difference*, Connolly contemplates the way in which affirming any sort of identity simultaneously affirms difference. As he states early on, “to confess a particular identity is also to belong to a difference.... My personal identity is defined through the collective constituencies with which I identify... it is further specified by comparison to a variety of things I am not.”¹ Appreciating this *relational* aspect of identity, for Connolly, is crucial if we are to properly understand the way in which identity functions within politics. In *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Connolly explores the tension between *pluralism* and *pluralization* in modern society. While pluralism strives to be attendant to the differences between *extant* identities in a political society, pluralization is the drive of new identities to be *enacted* out of those differences. These two forces are paradoxically linked; while pluralization requires the appreciation of difference which pluralism encourages, it is also hindered by the “state-centered nature” of pluralism and its focus on “settled contexts of conflict and collective action.”²

¹ Connolly, William (1991). *Identity / Difference*. University of Minnesota Press. p. xiv.

² Connolly, William (1995). *The Ethos of Pluralization*. University of Minnesota Press. p. xiii.

A failure to appreciate the relational aspect of identity, in particular the way in which it functions at this paradoxical juncture of modern pluralist politics, is, for Connolly, the root cause of what he terms the “second problem of evil”, or “the proclivity to marginalize or demonize difference to sanctify the identity you confess.”³ This proclivity has a particular tendency to occur during the process of identity affirmation at which a new identity is most vulnerable, namely when it “remains poised on that precarious threshold of enactment prior to its crystallization into a new form.”⁴ For Connolly, it is necessary for members of society to cultivate what he terms *critical responsiveness* in order to combat the deleterious effects of the tendency to threaten emerging identities in political society. The key ingredient in the formulation of such an ethos is, as Connolly puts it, an “appreciation of the fundamental contingency of things.”⁵

In particular, Connolly makes the claim that “the globalization of contingency is the defining mark of late modernity.”⁶ If indeed an appreciation of contingency is crucial to adopting an ethos of critical responsiveness, the concept is worth exploring in great detail. This paper puts forward two modest suggestions in that regard. First, I would offer that an appreciation of contingency as it pertains to specific, discrete events, operates in a significantly different way than does an appreciation of contingency in the arena of general, non-purposive outcomes (such as identity); it is unclear whether an appreciation of one type necessarily leads to an appreciation of the other. Second, in order to support Connolly’s claim that these two types of contingency co-operate in a manner unique to late-modern society, I will offer examples from ancient society in

³ Connolly (1991). p. xv; Connolly (1995). p. 180.

⁴ Connolly (1995). p. 182.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 181.

⁶ Connolly (1991). p. 25.

which the treatment of the two types of contingency looked radically different than it does today.

This paper is neither an attempt to substantively alter Connolly's claim that critical responsiveness might be used to combat the "second problem of evil", nor does it endeavor to "gauge too closely the probability that a more generous, pluralizing ethos will actually come into being", an enterprise that Connolly himself shies away from. Instead, the modest aims of this paper are limited to a simple exploration of the role that a greater appreciation of contingency might play in the cultivation of a generous ethos of critical responsiveness.

In order to do so, the paper is divided into four parts. In Part One, I will look more specifically at the "second problem of evil." Here I am interested in the way in which it manifests itself and how it might be encouraged or resisted. Part Two gives a detailed analysis of how, exactly, critical responsiveness might operate in order to alleviate the tendency of society to demonize "the other", as well as the way in which an appreciation of contingency helps to promote critical responsiveness in the first place. In Part Three, I will demonstrate that an appreciation of contingency with regard to specific, desired outcomes operates in a much different manner than the sort of contingency whose "globalization" is of great concern to Connolly. To demonstrate that the two types of contingency ought to be treated differently (and are not always positively correlated), I will appeal to examples in ancient literature of characters that fully embrace the *specific* type of contingency while failing to appreciate the *general* type necessary for an appreciation of identity\difference. At the heart of this differentiation, we will see, lies the concept of *agency*. Finally, in Part Four, I will build on Part Three to bolster

Connolly's case for an understanding of a relationship between these two types of contingency unique to late-modern society.

Part One: The Second Problem of Evil

“The fundamental unfairness of life. Everyone encounters it, in the innocent child who dies... the indispensable class condemned to a life of misery, an entire people subjected to genocide because of its religious or political identity.”⁷ So opens the introduction to William Connolly's book, *Identity\Difference*. He hopes to draw the reader's attention to the question: “Why do evil things happen?” Connolly explores a few answers to this “first problem of evil” which have been offered up throughout history, all attempting to identify some *agent* who is to blame for the bad outcome. For Connolly, all such attempts are in vain: “Anyone who poses a single, simple resolution to it [the first problem of evil] will almost certainly get it wrong.”⁸ Rather than focus our attention on blaming specific agents for the occurrence of evil in society, we ought to look, instead, to the *structural* components of the way in which society is organized that might contribute to a social pathology of a different sort. In doing so, he redirects the reader's gaze to what he calls the “second problem of evil”, namely, “the evil that flows from the attempt to establish security of identity for any individual or group by defining the other that exposes sore spots in one's identity as evil or irrational.”⁹ Attempts to analyze *this* site of social evil might not be so futile as the drive to locate responsibility, since this second type of pathology is inherently a *political* problem, and thus potentially lends itself to a political solution. As Connolly puts it, “there may be political ways to

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 8.

fend it off or to reduce its power.”¹⁰ The problem ultimately stems from a specific misunderstanding or lack of appreciation of the intersection of two key concepts: identity as difference and the paradox of pluralization. Let us look closely at these two ideas.

Central to Connolly’s entire project is the basic tenet that identity only exists in tandem with difference, and that any affirmation of identity simultaneously involves a recognition of dissimilarity. As he puts it:

An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things... Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.¹¹

In other words, identity functions with difference in two separate ways. First, identity can only be created in the first place in relation to others. As Connolly explains, “My personal identity is defined through the collective constituencies with which I identify; it is further specified by comparison to a variety of things that I am not.”¹² This “consolidation of identity”, though, need not be pathological if approached in the correct way.¹³ It often leads to negative side effects, however, when one feels threatened by the introduction of other identities which might call into question the definition of one’s own identity. Given that identity inherently forms out of difference, any introduction of new identities into the extant political order will put pressure on existing identities to change in turn; it is this pressure which encourages those in the extant order to resist change and

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 64.

¹² *Ibid.* p. xiv.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 9.

demonize rather than accept emerging identities. It is at this moment that the identity \ difference relationship turns pathological, causing existing identities to batten down the hatches in self-defense, and leaving emerging identities vulnerable to the harsh conditions of exclusion.

This tendency of difference to become pathological is amplified, according to Connolly, by the specific political arrangements of modern pluralistic society. Here, Connolly focuses on the tension between an appreciation of *pluralism* and a fear of *pluralization*. Pluralism, he says, is “advertised as a diverse, tolerant form of life” which “celebrates diversity within settled contexts of conflict and collective action.”¹⁴ In other words, pluralism functions only within the extant political order, encouraging an appreciation of difference between those identities which are already explicitly recognized by political institutions. Pluralization, though, is the drive to incorporate new, previously recognized identities into the political fold. These two forces do not always operate in tandem; in fact, they are paradoxically linked in a relationship of dependence and opposition:

The paradoxical politics of pluralist *enactment* – through which new, positive identities are forged out of old differences, injuries, and energies – does require preexisting pluralism as one of its supporting conditions. For preexisting pluralism provides new movements with funds of difference from which they proceed, subterranean connections from which responsiveness to them might be cultivated, and cultural continuities upon which new negotiations might build. But the culture of pluralism also engenders obstacles to new drives to pluralization that must be recurrently challenged.¹⁵

In other words, the reverence which pluralism places on difference is necessary in order for new identities to emerge, but it also solidifies those differences within the existing

¹⁴ Connolly (1995). p. xi, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. xiv.

political framework, thereby making them more difficult to penetrate. Stephen White identifies this “friction” as existing “between the imperative of protecting the economic and cultural conditions of the distribution of identities at any given time, on the one hand, and the imperative of openness to the emergence of new identities, on the other.”¹⁶

Given these two realities concerning the emergence of new identities (the interdependence of identity and difference and the paradox of pluralism) Connolly demonstrates just how susceptible the moment of emergence or affirmation of a new identity is to becoming pathological. As he puts it, “Perhaps the most revealing ethico-political moment occurs when a movement remains poised on that precarious threshold of enactment prior to its crystallization into a new form. This is the moment when it remains highly vulnerable to dismissal or repression by those responding to it.”¹⁷ It is at this specific moment, what Connolly often refers to as a “boundary crossing”, or the “magic threshold of enactment”, where the second problem of evil manifests itself:

At an early and vulnerable moment the new possibility has not yet achieved a sufficiently positive definition to pose a credible alternative to hegemonic definitions of what it is. A new “it” has not yet been formed. And the old institutionalized definition thereby retains considerable cultural resonance. The politics of enactment involves the struggle to cross both of these boundaries together – the barrier posed by the resistance of disrupted identities and that posed by the difficulty the movement faces in clearing sufficient institutional space to articulate a positive identity.¹⁸

It is at this boundary crossing, then, at this moment of the enactment or affirmation or becoming of a new identity, where identity formation runs the risk of becoming pathological. Its corruption is primarily the result of a failure to properly account for the

¹⁶ White, Stephen (2000). *Sustaining Affirmation*. Princeton University Press. p. 120.

¹⁷ Connolly (1995). p. 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 183, p. xvi.

interdependent relationship between identity and difference and / or an improper perspective on the paradox of pluralization by those in the existing political order. Having identified the location and causes of the problem, let us now move to a potential solution.

Part Two: Critical Responsiveness

Critical responsiveness at once addresses both of the problems which have the propensity to amplify the conditions under which the second problem of evil might appear. These two problems are, again, 1) a failure to appreciate the relationship between identity and difference and / or 2) a failure to negotiate the paradox of pluralization. Critical responsiveness addresses the first potential pitfall by forcing individuals to “examine established tactics of self-identity... by exploring the means by which one has become constituted as what one is, by probing the structures that maintain the plausibility of those configurations, and by analyzing from a perspective that problematizes the certainty of one’s self-identity the effects these structures and tactics have on others [sic].”¹⁹ As for the second problem, Connolly assures us that “critical responsiveness is an indispensable lubricant of political pluralization.”²⁰ Further, “an ethos of critical responsiveness, when it is operative, supports these boundary crossings” at which point the politics of enactment is most vulnerable.²¹ With this in mind, let us explore in more detail the way in which the cultivation of an ethos of critical responsiveness might address these two problems.

Before going any further, it is important to keep in mind, as Connolly makes clear in various places, that critical responsiveness “is neither entirely reducible to a

¹⁹ Connolly (1991). p. 10.

²⁰ Connolly (1995). p. xvii.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 183.

preexisting moral code nor (incontestably) derivable from a transcendental command or contract.”²² In other words, one cannot point to a positive definition of critical responsiveness; as Connolly suggests, “the key may be to turn disturbance of what you are into critical responsiveness to what you are not.”²³ It might simply be summed up as an openness to view your own identity as contestable; to acknowledge that your identity does not exist independently of others’, and that the move to protect your own identity is built upon assumptions of certainty and moral self-righteousness that ought to be relaxed. The concept is best described in the following passage:

The most fragile and indispensable element in a pluralizing democracy is an ethos of critical responsiveness to new social movements, an ethos that opens up cultural space through which new possibilities of being might be enacted. The politics of enactment applies new pressures to existing constellations of identity\difference by shaking the cultural ground in which they are rooted. But this is not all. It also presses hegemonic identities, which are always dependent upon the very differences they define, to translate this experience of disturbance into a will to modify themselves so that they no longer remain exactly what they were, so that they change enough to open up new possibilities of negotiation and coexistence with new claims to identity.²⁴

Nevertheless, let us attempt to unpack the concept a bit more, not in hopes of getting after any specific moral code, but simply with the goal of identifying more clearly how critical responsiveness might be useful in combating the tendency to label the other as “evil” or “irrational.”

First, Connolly gives us three qualities of critical responsiveness: it is *anticipatory*, *critical*, and *self-revisionary*.²⁵ The self-revisionary aspect is most crucial for our analysis here; it is in this regard that a deficiency might have the greatest tendency

²² *Ibid.* p. xvii.

²³ *Ibid.* p. xviii.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 184.

to engender the conditions under which the second problem of evil emerges. One must be willing to make room at the table for newly emerging identities; only when one recognizes the interdependence of identity and difference can one appreciate the fact that “those on the responding end [of an emerging identity] eventually must modify what they are, in form or content or both, if the new movement is to attain sufficient cultural space to crystallize a new identity.”²⁶ In this way, the exhibition of critical responsiveness on the part of those whose identity is already defined in the extant political order resists the sort of defensive exclusivity which might occur in its place if one instead feels panicked or threatened by the emergence of a new identity. As Connolly nicely sums, “The ethos of critical responsiveness pursued here does not reduce the other to what some ‘we’ already is. It opens up cultural space through which the other might consolidate itself into something that is unafflicted by negative cultural markings.”²⁷ Cultivating an ethos of responsiveness reduces the tendency to view one’s identity as existing in a position removed from the political community in which it resides, thus addressing the first problem stemming from a failure to recognize the interconnectedness of identity and difference.

Second, with regard to addressing the problems of the paradox of pluralization, the adoption of an ethos of critical responsiveness would expand pluralism beyond merely a “state-centered ideal”, and would “multiply lines of connection through which governing assemblages [could] be constructed from a variety of intersecting constituencies.”²⁸ One would appreciate the diversity of a greater range of identities within extant political institutions. As Connolly puts it, “possibilities for democratic

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. xvii.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. xiii, p. xx.

political action are enhanced when diverse, interwoven constituencies resist becoming frozen into contending claims to intrinsic identity or exclusive morality.”²⁹ In other words, before even addressing the problem of *emerging* identities, the cultivation of an ethos of critical responsiveness would, at the most basic level, expand the sites at which a political entity might feel connected *within the established community*. Taken further, this newly appreciated connection with others in the community might extend, Connolly wants us to believe, to a more lenient stance toward *pluralization*, or the introduction of new identities into the political fold, as well. This might occur by blurring the lines of territorialization so as to acknowledge the fluidity of identity across state or national lines; movements to expand some sort of suffrage to resident aliens would be an example of a specific policy that would employ this tactic. The hope is that, once an ethos of responsiveness is cultivated, it will counteract the tendency on the part of individuals in the political order to feel threatened by emerging identities, making them less likely to become defensive and exclusionary. In sum, again, with regard to the paradox of pluralization, critical responsiveness acts on one level to expand the range of connection between *already* interdependent identities (i.e. extend pluralism) as well as encourage openness to the emergence of previously unrecognized identities (i.e. encourage pluralization). In this two-fold manner, then, critical responsiveness can loosen the tension in the knot which exists at the center of the paradox of pluralization, thereby alleviating some of the pressure which often leads to a manifestation of the second problem of evil.

We have seen, then, how critical responsiveness might offer an alleviation of the two problems which lead to the second problem of evil. But how might such an ethos be

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. xx.

cultivated in the first place? The seed of critical responsiveness seems to be, for Connolly, an appreciation of “contingency:”

The cultivation of critical responsiveness grows above all out of the appreciation that no culturally constituted constellation of identities ever deserves to define itself simply as natural, complete, or inclusive. For it is this fugitive, always underdeveloped, experience of contingency in what you are that taps into the ethical capacity to respond to injuries shuffled under justice by practice of justice.³⁰

Only when one appreciates the “contingency of things” might she hope to cultivate just the sort of ethos of critical responsibility that might combat the “the proclivity to marginalize or demonize difference to sanctify the identity you confess.”³¹ Part Three turns now to a careful analysis of what, exactly, Connolly means by “contingency.”

Part Three: Contingency

We remember, of course, that Connolly’s overarching goal in his project is to locate the moment in the politics of enactment when nascent identities are most vulnerable to exclusion, as well as to explore ways of protecting those identities and helping them carve out a space in the extant cultural and political sphere. The moment occurs at the “boundary crossing” period when a new identity is on the verge of being recognized, and this crossing takes on a pathological quality when those in the extant political order either fail to acknowledge the interdependent nature of identity and difference, or fail to account for the paradox of pluralization, or both. To help alleviate any pathological tendencies, Connolly prescribes that those whose identities are already recognized adopt an ethos of critical responsiveness, in which they reorient themselves in

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 188.

³¹ Connolly (1991). p. xv; Connolly (1995). p. 180.

such a way so as to resist exclusion of the newly formed identity and acknowledge its space in the extant political sphere.

At the heart of this reorientation is a greater appreciation of contingency. As he puts it, “The one who construes her identity to be laced with contingencies... is in a better position to question and resist the drive to convert difference into otherness to be defeated, converted, or marginalized.”³² In other words, one who appreciates contingency is in a better position to resist the second problem of evil. Now, Connolly himself, in *Identity\Difference*, admits that the term “contingency” might have various meanings. He conveniently clues the reader in to what exactly *he* means by it in the following passage:

By contrast to the necessary and universal, it means that which is changeable and particular; by contrast to the certain and constant, it means that which is uncertain and variable; by contrast to the self-subsistent and causal, it means that which is dependent and effect; by contrast to the expected and regular, it means that which is unexpected and irregular; and by contrast to the safe and reassuring, it means that which is dangerous, unruly, and obdurate in its danger.³³

This characterization is deliberately vague. But I would offer that one simple clarification could be made in order to distinguish two different types of contingency: contingency related to specific events vs. contingency in a general sense.

Specific contingency, from now on referred to as contingency_s, can be characterized as an appreciation of alternative outcomes stemming from particular, discrete events. In this sense, an appreciation of contingency_s involves the recognition that one cannot necessarily *control* the outcome of all events in their own lives. The phrase “shit happens” comes to mind here. So, a contingent_s outcome, for my purposes,

³² *Ibid.* p. 180.

³³ Connolly (1991). p. 28.

might be defined as “any outcome that lies outside of the expected range of outcomes given a rational and deliberate action or set of actions.” The important aspect of contingency_s, then, is *purpose*. In order for an outcome to be contingent in this sense, there must have been some goal on the part of the *agent* to achieve a specific outcome within a desired set of probable outcomes.

A failure to properly account for contingency_s outcomes, then, might be characterized as flawed reverence for determinism; one who fails to appreciate that there might be results of her actions which are completely unforeseen and *out of her control* might act in a very different way than one who appreciates this possibility. An appreciation of contingency_s can certainly result in modified behavior; one who appreciates that there might be outcomes beyond her control or expectation might be slightly more cautious or deliberate in her actions. There is a psychological aspect to an appreciation of contingency_s as well: with its recognition comes the corresponding appreciation that one’s successes might not entirely be the result of deliberate action, and similarly for one’s failures. So, in sum, contingency_s involves 1) purposive action, and 2) unexpected outcomes of that purposive action.

On the other hand, contingency in a general sense operates somewhat differently. I will refer to this type of contingency, not surprisingly, as contingency_g. This sort of contingency encapsulates the sort of contingency that arises from an event which either a) did not stem from a purposive action in the first place or b) resulted from an action whose purpose is unknown to the observer. Examples would include a person’s place of birth, sex, or color of skin; all elements of “identity” would fall under the contingency_g category. As Connolly puts it: “Think of specific ‘traits’ and ‘dispositions’ installed in

the self.”³⁴ Notice the use of the word “installed” here; there is a clear sense in which these traits are not the result of any one particular agent. As he explains,

Since the entire complex is not the product of a single hand or design but formed through a complex history of parental relations, historical events, disparate experiences, and contingent biological endowments, it is highly probably that a variety of tensions, disharmonies, and disjunctions reside within this complex of conjunctions.³⁵

It is an appreciation of this type of contingency, of contingency_g, that Connolly hopes will help germinate an ethos of critical responsiveness.

The key difference between contingency_s and contingency_g, as we have seen, is *agency*. While contingency_s involves the occurrence of an outcome outside of the range of outcomes expected by an agent partaking in some purposive action, contingency_g has no discernible agent in the first place. As we will see later, Connolly argues that the conditions of late-modern society place the two types of contingency in a *unique* relationship in which a *failure* to appreciate contingency_s leads to a proliferation of (and corresponding *failure* in accepting) contingency_g. In other words, the respective approaches to the two types of contingency are positively correlated. In support of Connolly’s claim that this relationship might be unique to the conditions of late-modern society, I offer examples in ancient society which demonstrate that the relationship was then quite different; that a successful appreciation of contingency_s did not necessarily correspond positively to a corresponding ability to appreciate contingency_g. In particular, in the ancient Greek mind, the two types of contingency were not linked in the way that Connolly suggests they are in late-modern society.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 173.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 174.

³⁶ Again, I recognize that I am simply disproving the inverse of Connolly’s claim, and that this by no means *validates* his assertion in a logical sense, but should still be viewed as supporting it, albeit modestly.

The Greek Tragic Vision

At the center of the Greek tragic vision of existence lies the concept of *limitation*. I use the phrase “tragic vision” here not to refer to any specific moral code (as Taylor uses “warrior code”, for example) or world-view as embodied by *specific* characters of Greek tragedy. Instead, I refer to a more general sense of man’s recognition that he is incapable of controlling various aspects of his life, chief among these being death. Homeric epic and Greek tragedy both present characters in situations where they are confronted by a contingent event, often attributed to “fate”, and are forced either to humbly accept it or resist. This struggle to appreciate contingency in the Greek mind seems to be functioning on the level of what we have called contingency_s. Greeks often had an acute sense of the contingency of specific events in their lives, while still maintaining a significant inability to recognize the relationship between identity and difference. In other words, an appreciation of contingency_s *did not lead* to a corresponding appreciation of contingency_g. The Greeks were masters at characterizing “the other” as existing outside of an impenetrable cultural and social sphere. The friend-enemy distinction has perhaps never been so stark as it was in ancient Greece. And yet, much of Greek literature explores characters’ struggle with contingency. In what follows are three such episodes that focus on this struggle.

First, let us look at one of the most poignant scenes in Homer’s *Iliad*: the death of Hector. The scene offers a shining example of the differences between the two types of contingencies that we are looking for (albeit each embodied in separate characters). In

Essentially, I simply hope to show that the negation of Connolly’s inference has not always held, which should be seen as proof that something has indeed changed in late modernity.

the scene, Achilles has been chasing Hector around the city of Troy for hours. Finally, exhausted, Hector turns to Achilles and offers a pact:

Now my soul would have me stand and fight, whether I kill you or am killed. So come, we'll summon gods here as our witnesses, none higher, arbiters of a pact: I swear that, terrible as you are, I'll not insult your corpse should Zeus allow me victory in the end, your life as prize. Once I have your gear, I'll give your body back to the Achaeans. Grant me, too, this grace.³⁷

Achilles' response is a perfect indication of just the sort of inability to appreciate contingency of identity that Connolly hopes will engender critical responsiveness. He is incapable of seeing past the Greek / Trojan distinction to find some transcendent commonality by which an agreement might be made. Achilles retorts:

Hector, I'll have no talk of pacts with you, forever unforgiven as you are. As between men and lions there are none, no concord between wolves and sheep, but all hold one another hateful through and through, so there can be no courtesy between us, no sworn truce, till one of us is down and glutting with his blood the wargod Ares.³⁸

Homer presents the audience with an excellent characterization of the Greek vision of friend vs. enemy here. There is simply no place in the imagination of Achilles to put himself in Hector's shoes and appreciate the generalized contingency of their respective identities. A few lines later, though, the episode gives the audience a glaring example of an *appreciation* of the other type of contingency, the specific kind, when Hector realizes that he has been undone. He calls out for his brother Deiphobos to lend him an extra spear, only to discover that it he has been spirited away from the battle by Athena.

Hector nevertheless faces the impossibility of his situation with dignity and acceptance:

³⁷ Homer. *Illiad*. Book 22, lines 294-305. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald (1974). Anchor Books. p. 523.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Book 22, lines 296-317.

Then he gave a great shout to Deiphobos to ask for along spear. But there was no one near him, not a soul. Now in his heart the Trojan realized the truth and said: 'This is the end. The gods are calling deathward. I had thought a good soldier, Deiphobos, was with me. He is inside the walls. Athena tricked me. Death is near, and black, not at a distance, not to be evaded... Still I would not die without delivering a stroke, or die ingloriously, but in some action memorable to men in days to come.'³⁹

The more general implications of this exchange in characterizing the Greek tragic vision are enormous, and needn't be dwelled upon here. What is important for the purposes of this paper, though, is that the scene captures just the sort of distinction between the two types of contingency upon which I am focused, and the jarring juxtaposition of the submission to one with the simultaneous resistance of the other.

Another example from Greek epic of the power of contingency is, of course, the journey of wily Odysseus from Homer's *The Odyssey*. A specific scene needn't be presented here to illustrate the different senses of contingency upon which we are focused. Anyone familiar with the story knows the extent to which Odysseus was subjected to events outside of his control: held by a magical nymph, captured by a Cyclops, thrown about constantly by the sea, and undone by the ignorance of his own men, just to name a few. Odysseus' story is paradigmatic of the Greek lesson that there are events outside of your control, and that the more you resist rather than accept your helplessness, the more dire your situation becomes. This, of course, all revolves around the sort of contingency of specific events that we've detailed, or contingency_s. But, after an entire story in which Odysseus is consistently confronted with the awesome power of contingency_s, do you think he has learned anything about the contingency of identity? Hardly. His slaying of the suitors at the end of the book could not be a clearer indication

³⁹ *Ibid.* Book 22, lines 347-363.

that Odysseus still sees the world of identity and difference to be quite separate. In other words, even though he may have gained an appreciation for contingency_s, he is still terribly unappreciative of contingency_g. Let us look to the text.

Odysseus's recognition of helplessness in the face of repeated misfortune is probably best summed in his plea to the Phaeacian princess, Nausicaa, upon washing up, naked and beaten by the waves, on her shore:

Only yesterday, the twentieth day, did I escape the wine dark sea. Till then the waves and the rushing gales had swept me on from the island of Ogygia. Now some power has tossed me here, doubtless to suffer still more torments on your shores. I can't believe they'll stop. Long before that the gods will give me more, still more.⁴⁰

This is, above all, the voice of resignation. Odysseus has come to grips, here, with the fact that his fate is no longer (or perhaps never has been) his own. Much better, he realizes, to simply submit himself to the fact that there are outcomes beyond his control, and that the best he might do is weather the storm. He has come to grips with an appreciation of contingency_s. Throughout the story he had tried to control his fate, often with disastrous consequences. His condition during the trip home from Phaeacia to Ithaca, though, is the physical embodiment of his new sense of resignation. When he departs Phaeacia, he simply lies down in the ship's hull and falls asleep. He has let go of any attempt to control the situation. As Homer describes it, the ship was

bearing a man endowed with the gods' own wisdom, one who had suffered twenty years of torment, sick at heart, cleaving his way through wars of men and pounding waves at sea, but now he slept in peace, the memory of his struggles laid to rest. And then, that hour the star rose up, the clearest, brightest star, that always heralds the newborn light of day, the deep-sea-going ship made landfall on the island... Ithaca, at last.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Homer. *The Odyssey*. Book 6, lines 188-196. Translated by Robert Fagles (1996). Penguin Classics. p. 174.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Book 13, lines 101-109.

This surely must be read as a lesson: attempt to control fate, and you will be met with resistance. Accept the fact that many outcomes are simply out of your control, and relax your grip on attempts to shape the events of your life, and you will be rewarded; in other words, embrace contingency.

And yet, despite this recognition, upon his return to Ithaca, he immediately becomes consumed with a plan of bloody revenge on the suitors. Never mind the fact that he has been gone and presumed dead for *twenty years*, he has no sympathy for the men who have attempted to court his beloved wife, Penelope. The rage which Odysseus unleashes on them is remarkable to say the least, and hardly befitting someone on the path to a cultivation of critical responsiveness. This is perhaps most telling during his exchange with the prophet of the hall, Leodes. The priest implores the rampaging Odysseus:

‘I hug your knees, Odysseus – mercy! Spare my life! Never, I swear, did I harass any woman in your house – never a word, a gesture – nothing, no, I tried to restrain the suitors, whoever did such things. They wouldn’t listen, keep their hands to themselves – so reckless, so they earn their shameful fate. But I was just their prophet – my hands are clean – and I’m to die their death! Look at the thanks I get for years of service!’⁴²

Leodes might as well have been saying, “Look! I’m just in the wrong place at the wrong time! You of all people should realize the contingency of these sorts of things!”

Odysseus’ response is bereft of any understanding of the plight of the poor priest; he summarily chops off his head.

Finally, perhaps no character in ancient Greek literature better exemplifies the ability to embrace contingency, on the one hand while simultaneously refusing, at all

⁴² *Ibid.* Book 22, lines 324-334.

costs, to accept contingency, than does Sophocles' Ajax. After losing a wrestling match to Odysseus over Achilles' armor (after he had died during the siege of Troy, so the story goes), Ajax works himself into a fury, feeling that he has been unfairly judged by Agamemnon and the other generals. He sets out on a rampage to capture and kill Odysseus himself, but Athena stays his hand and enchants him in such a way that he instead slaughters a herd of cattle, mistaking them for Odysseus and his men. He is tricked, duped, and ashamed. His situation is the result of events beyond his control, and he recognizes it:

Do you see that I, the bold, the valiant, the one who never trembled in battle among enemies, have done mighty deeds among beasts that frightened no one? Ah, the mockery! What an insult I have suffered! Wretched am I, who let the accursed ones slip through my hands, and fell upon horned oxen and noble flocks to shed black blood! Ah, darkness that is my light, gloom that is most bright for me, take me, take me to dwell in you! For I am no longer worthy to look upon the race of gods nor upon that of mortal men to any profit.⁴³

Although he sees that his shame is not the result of his own agency, but rather that of forces beyond his control, he nevertheless remains incapable of letting go of his strong grip on the Greek code of honor. Ajax's world is a black and white one, with little room for much flexibility when it comes to conceptions of identity. There is a standard norm to which behavior is measured in ancient Greece; a failure to live up to this norm leaves the honorable individual with only one solution: death. As Ajax explains, moments before falling on his own sword:

And if my eye and mind had not been turned aside, *swerving from my intention* (my emphasis), they [Odysseus, Agamemnon, et al.] would not have lived to vote such a decision against another man. But as it is the fierce-eyed untamable goddess, daughter of

⁴³ Sophocles. *Ajax*. Lines 366-400. Translated by Hugh Lloyd Jones (1994). Loeb Classical Series. pp. 62-68

Zeus, overthrew me, casting a plague of madness upon me just as I was stretching out my hand against them, so that I stained my hands with the blood of these beasts. And they have escaped and are laughing at me; *the fault is not mine* (my emphasis), but if one of the gods does harm, even the coward may escape the stronger man... When a man has no relief from troubles, it is shameful for him to desire long life. What pleasure comes from day following day, bringing us near to and taking us back from death? I would not set any value upon a man who is warmed by false hopes. The noble man must live with honor or be honorably dead; you have heard all I have to say.⁴⁴

Ajax's famous soliloquy encapsulates everything that this paper has been trying to insist upon with regard to the different treatment of contingencies, and the way in which one could be appreciated while the other is completely ignored. Ajax recognizes that his intention was futile, that he is not to blame for his current situation, and yet he refuses to allow the contestability of discrete events to encourage a contestability of the identity which he holds with such strong conviction.

The intention of this section, again, was to demonstrate that the Greek tragic vision offers up numerous examples of literary characters expressing, on the one hand, an appreciation for and resignation to the contingency of everyday life, or contingency_s, while refusing to acknowledge the sort of general contingency of identity, or contingency_g, that Connolly hopes might help cultivate an ethos of responsiveness. Put simply, in the mind of the ancient Greek, the two types of contingency were not necessarily positively related.

Part Four: Why Does It Matter?

Up to this point, the paper has accomplished three things. In Part One, we looked at Connolly's lamentation of what he calls the "second problem of evil," or "the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Lines

proclivity to marginalize or demonize difference to sanctify the identity you confess.”⁴⁵

In Part Two, we explored Connolly’s prescription of this social pathology, namely the cultivation of an ethos of critical responsiveness. We saw that a central component of this ethos is an “appreciation of the fundamental contingency of things.”⁴⁶ In Part Three, I called for an explicit distinction to be made between an appreciation of the contingency of specific events, or contingency_s, and an appreciation of contingency in general (the type necessary to yield critically responsive conceptions of identity), or contingency_g. To illustrate how exactly this claim might be considered, I explored the narrative of ancient Greek tragedy, looking at various characters who might have, indeed, had an “appreciation for the fundamental contingency of things,” but who nevertheless were largely incapable of letting go of the tendency to draw sharp distinctions of identity which lead to a manifestation of the second problem of evil. This demonstrates, I hope, that an appreciation of contingency_s might not be sufficient to yield a corresponding appreciation of contingency_g, and that the two have not always been positively related in past societies. Now, we are ready to put all of the pieces together by revisiting Connolly’s thoughts on contingency in detail.

As we have seen, at the heart of the distinction between contingency_s and contingency_g lies the concept of *agency*. While a specifically contingent event might be described as one in which an agent encounters a result beyond the range of his expected results (to hearken back to the examples in Part Three, these would include reaching for a spear that wasn’t there, finding oneself ravaged by the sea when you were expecting a smooth sail, or regaining one’s senses amidst a tent of viciously slaughtered cattle), a

⁴⁵ Connolly (1991). p. xv.

⁴⁶ Connolly (1995). p. 181.

generally contingent outcome is one which pertains to identity, and has no discernible single agent or cause. And yet, it seems that a driving force behind the proclivity to demonize the other is, indeed, one of *agency*; we *blame* the other for bad outcomes in our own life (i.e. the immigrant cost me my job, etc.) instead of appreciating just how fragile and delicate real-life outcomes are. Identity\difference becomes pathological, after all, at the moment when we attribute too much causality to events around us, in particular those which result in bad outcomes, and look for someone to blame. This is evident in Connolly's discussion of "generalized resentment", which he refers to as that sort which individuals who have measured up to some social norm hold over those who have failed to measure up. As he suggests, those who are resentful in this way wonder, "What gives these "others" the right to complain when many struggling to measure up to the demands of life as a project already face as much self-discipline, dependency, and uncertainty as they can handle?"⁴⁷ The pathology that this sort of resentment stems from is a lack of appreciation of contingency_s; individuals who have achieved some given social position feel that it is the result of their own agency and hard work, and those who have failed to do so *deserve*, somehow, the social stigma or exclusion that comes with their position.

It seems that a solution to this sort of resentment is, indeed, a greater appreciation of contingency_s. But, as we have seen, it has historically been possible to appreciate this sort of contingency while still maintaining a strong hold on rigid conceptions of identity and difference. So how does an appreciation of contingency_s actually get us closer to solving the second problem of evil and cultivating an ethos of critical responsiveness? What is the specific mechanism by which the proper recognition of contingency_s engenders a similarly proper understanding of contingency_g?

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 23.

It is here that Connolly makes, as I understand it at least, one of the most dynamic and interesting moves in his project. He explains that the two types of contingency (what he calls microcontingency and macrocontingency) *are* in fact positively related; that an attempt to “domesticate” (or a failure to appreciate and resign oneself to) microcontingency, or contingency_s, given the particular dynamics of modern society, leads to an *increase* in the proliferation of macrocontingencies, causing us to further shore up a rigid grip on the certainty of our identities, thereby exacerbating the second problem of evil. A failure to appreciate one leads to an increased difficulty in appreciating the other. As he puts it: “The project to master microcontingencies and the globalization of macrocontingency advance together, while the organization of state-centered political discourse celebrates the first effect by banalizing the second.”⁴⁸ It is here, at this juncture in Connolly’s theory, that the discussion of ancient Greek ideas of contingency becomes especially useful. Connolly wants to make the argument that there is something unique to late modernity which has caused the two types of contingency to become intricately linked (and in such a positive way):

In late modernity, the contingency of life and the fragility of things become more vivid and compelling, while reflection on the issues posed by this condition is shuffled to the margins of state centered discourse. Established disciplines and rules become experienced more often as arbitrary restraints insecurely linked to the future that justifies them. Resentment becomes more generalized and acute, and more actively seeks available targets of vilification.⁴⁹

This passage suggests that, with our increasingly unparalleled ability to control everyday, contingent_s outcomes, modern society has in fact begun to exacerbate contingent_g outcomes. Simple examples include deforestation, industrialization, nuclear power, etc.

⁴⁸ Connolly (1991). p. 25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The important aspect of the equation is that contingent_g outcomes are the particularly *scary* ones; when some outcome occurs in our own everyday life (a contingent_s event), the desire for culpability usually only extends to our immediate sphere (or at least stays within the existing political sphere). When we are faced with large-scale contingencies, however (and they are getting larger by the day), we take to shadow boxing, grasping blindly at anything that moves in order to satisfy our desire for blame and meaning. It is in *this* process especially that conceptions of difference have a particular tendency to become pathological. The fact that the positive relationship which Connolly suggests did not necessarily hold in ancient times (i.e. even when the Greeks *were* attendant to contingent_s events, they still struggled with accepting contingencies of *being* or *identity*) seems, if nothing else, to support Connolly's claim that the globalization of macrocontingency is, indeed, "the defining mark of late modernity."⁵⁰ Again, to be clear, a failure to resign ourselves in modern society to contingency_s has led to a corresponding difficulty in resigning ourselves to contingency_g. The ancient Greeks were clearly able to resign themselves to contingency_s, but seemingly could not have been worse at recognizing contingency_g. Something has clearly changed in the causal relationship between the two; this ought to give support to Connolly's contention that contingency does, in fact, operate uniquely in late-modern society.

Conclusion

Let us briefly recap. Connolly, in both *Identity\Difference* and *The Ethos of Pluralization*, draws our attention to the second problem of evil, or the tendency to demonize and marginalize "the other." As a potential prescription, he suggests the cultivation of an ethos of critical responsiveness, which would better appreciate the role

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 25.

of identity\difference at the intersection of the paradox of pluralization. Central to this cultivation is, as Connolly describes it, “a more vital appreciation of the contingency of things.”⁵¹ He makes the argument that late modernity has created a unique relationship between two types of contingency, micro- and macrocontingency, or, as I have characterized them, contingency_s and contingency_g. He suggests that the two types, in modern society, are positively related, with a failure to accept contingency_s leading to a greater inability to control contingency_g. This inability leads to an exacerbation of the marginalization of “the other”. To support Connolly’s claim that this relationship is indeed unique to modern society, we looked at various examples of ancient Greek literature which demonstrate that the positive relationship *did not hold* in pre-modern times; we saw characters who, on the one hand, yielded to contingency_s, and yet were ruthless in their inability to accept contingency_g. In this way, then, the paper has met the two modest goals which it set at the beginning: 1) further the case for a differentiated view of contingency, and 2) support Connolly’s claim that these two types of contingency function in an interdependent relationship which is unique to late-modern society.

⁵¹ Connolly (1995). p. 25.