

Theory & Event

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On the Fragility of Things

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Abstract

The term “fragility” that appears in the title of William Connolly’s book *The Fragility of Things* refers to many things, but one of them is the fragility of our planet, and the ecosystem of its surface. This fragility has been made manifest by the fact that humanity itself has now become a natural force as potentially destructive as any earthquake or meteor strike, as any tsunami or fire. One of Connolly’s theses is that the Earth is no longer simply the stage upon which human politics is played out, but that it itself has become an active player in our politics. Our thinking about politics must take on a cosmic dimension; we need a “cosmo-politics,” to use Stengers’ term. It is primarily Connolly’s new manner of thinking this polis-cosmos relation that I explore in this paper.

Like all of William Connolly’s works, *The Fragility of Things* presents its readers with a rich and multi-layered text, and as longtime admirer of Connolly’s writings, I found my own thinking stretched in various unforeseen directions as I read the book.¹ I realized, in reading the text, that my mind is far less plastic and supple than Connolly’s, far more simplistic, and I say this with regret as well as admiration, for Connolly’s gifts for synthesis and insight are extraordinary. As a result, I have focused my comments on a single theme in Connolly’s book, but it is the theme that my simple mind found most intriguing and original. It is not simply the idea that, in our political thinking, we must take into account the Earth and its fragility, but rather, more broadly—and more difficultly—the idea that our political sensibilities must be extended to include a truly *cosmic* dimension. In other words, we need to think the polis through the cosmos, and we must

do this, not in terms of the old micro-macrocosmic relation, but in an entirely new manner. It is Connolly's new way of thinking this relation that I would like to explore in the seven mini-reflections that follow.

1. Gods, Humans, and the Earth

The Fragility of Things begins with a poignant description of a disastrous event: the destruction of Lisbon, Portugal, on All Saints Day in 1751 by an earthquake, a tsunami, and a massive fire. These “non-human force fields”² had profound effects on the future of a very human Europe, in part because the devastation they seemed to call into question the rationality of God. How could he do such a thing? Adorno famously noted that, less than two centuries later, Auschwitz and Hiroshima would have a similar effect, but this time what was called into question was the rationality of humans, and not the rationality of God. The question was no longer, how could God do such a thing? but rather, how could we do such things?³

In a certain sense, Connolly's book is pointing to a third event that can now be added to these two earlier events, an event in which the central character is no longer God or humans, but planet earth—or even the cosmos itself. What we call history has tended to focus on the struggles of gods and humans; they have been the players of history, and the Earth was simply the stage on which their struggles were played out. In an earlier book, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, Connolly admirably analyzed the inner workings of one of these struggles between gods and humans, which he called, brilliantly, “the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine”—a machine that I grew up in, and revisit every time I return home.⁴ But the significance of *The Fragility of Things* is that it opens up onto a larger domain that, while not ignoring these all-too-human struggles, inserts them into a broader framework that is properly cosmic. How can a cosmic point of view help us rethink “neoliberal fantasies” and “democratic activism,” the themes of Connolly's subtitle? Here are two suggestions, the first taken from a Goya painting, the second from a Stoic adage by Epictetus.

2. Goya's “Fight with Cudgels”

In the early 1800's, Goya painted the walls of his own house with a series of works that have come to be called his “black paintings.” One of them is called “Fight with Cudgels,” which depicts two men fighting each other in what appears to be a struggle to the death. Which of these two men, one wonders, is going to win? Goya, in fact, has situated the fight in the midst of a marsh, and the more the men fight, the deeper they are sinking into the quicksand beneath them. Already, in the painting, the men have sunk up to their knees. Unless they stop fighting, it is clear that neither is going to win; they are both going to disappear into the muck. But they continue to cudgel each other, and the more they cudgel, the more quickly they are consumed.

Michel Serres has provided a trenchant analysis of Goya's painting in his book *The Natural Contract*, but for me, it functions as a good image of Connolly's book as well.⁵ The media is constantly obsessed with the question, who is going to win? Who is going to win the next

election, or the war, or tomorrow's football game, or the next Olympic gold medal? (The answer, of course, is always the same: it is the rich who win, whether at elections or at the Olympics.) It is these games with two players that have always fascinated us, and which keeps us thinking in economic or political terms: left versus right, Republicans versus Democrats, green versus blue, and so on. These games with two players still exist, of course, but they now include this third party that was once excluded from them: the earth. The earth is no longer merely a stage, but has become a subject, a partner, so that what is needed today is not simply a politics, but what Isabelle Stengers has called a "cosmopolitics."⁶ Connolly's book is entitled *The Fragility of Things*, but in the days of Goya, the planet was not considered fragile; on the contrary, it was threatening, and it easily triumphed over humans. But that has changed, and the situation has been inverted: once victorious, the Earth is now increasingly a victim, as it were, subject to our actions as humans.

3. Epictetus' Adage

How and when did the earth become fragile? To get at this point, let me turn to my second example, a famous Stoic adage, the opening line of Epictetus' *Enchiridion*: "Some things are in our control, and others are not."⁷ The advice of the Stoics: focus on the things that are in your control. The Lisbon earthquake may destroy my house, but Nature is something I cannot control. What I *can* control, however, is myself, that is, my *reaction* to the destruction of my house. I can either react negatively with *ressentiment*, finding what happened unjust or unwarranted; or I can act affirmatively with what Nietzsche would later call a kind of *amor fati*, a love of fate—or at least an acceptance of it. This is what it means to be "stoic" in the face of adversity: Do not be unworthy of the events that happen to you.⁸

Today, however, the terms of this ancient Stoic adage have been inverted, in two ways. On the one hand, Nature itself, to a certain degree, is increasingly coming under our control, and indeed that control is growing at an accelerated pace. We are becoming, following Descartes' dictum, the "masters and possessors of Nature." On the other hand, humanity itself is becoming a force of nature as potentially destructive as any earthquake, tsunami, or fire, but we seem to be exerting less and less control over our own activities. Our control over Nature is escalating, but our control over our own natures, as it were, is not.

Indeed, the situation is more complicated than this. It is not simply the Earth that has become a victim to our actions; we ourselves are increasingly becoming the victims of our victories over Nature. Climate change, which Connolly brings up throughout the book, is only the most obvious instance of this. Things that used to not depend on us, like the weather, are now starting to depend on us; and we ourselves are starting to depend on the things that depend on us. In short, it is no longer possible to be Stoic in the same way. Pierre Hadot reminded us that philosophy, for the ancients, was a way of life, but the way of life recommended by philosophy can no longer be the same.⁹ Even our relation to fate has changed.

This is why the Earth has taken on a new status: no longer merely a stage, the Earth has become an object for us. Thanks to the astronauts, we have seen pictures of Earthrise over the moon, and more recently, images of Earth as a pixelated dot barely visible between the rings of Saturn. But the Earth is not an object in the old sense of the term (“ob-ject” means that which is thrown or jettisoned before us), for when the Earth reacts to our actions, the global object in effect becomes a subject, a partner. As a result, this new situation forces us reexamine many of our familiar philosophical concepts—such as, precisely, subject and object, as well as knowledge and action—from a new perspective.

For almost a century now, we have become used to a-cosmic philosophies that have held forth on language and logic, politics and propositions. What we need now, Connolly is telling us, is a truly cosmic philosophy, in the tradition of Nietzsche, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze. “Respect for persons,” or even human rights, is no longer enough; we must add to these a “care for the earth,” an “ethic of cultivation.”¹⁰ Put differently, we need a true philosophy of Nature. In the twentieth-century, the philosophy of Nature had disappeared in favor of a philosophy of science, as if philosophers had handed over the exploration of Nature to scientists, and restricted themselves to analyzing the propositions produced by scientists. But what would a genuine cosmic philosophy of Nature look like in the twenty-first century?

4. The Grand Narrative of the Sciences

As an approach to this question, let me take a cue from Connolly and look at some recent developments in science. If there is one thing that has united the diverse sciences over the past few decades, it is their development of various techniques by which to measure the age of their respective objects: astronomers can date the big bang and the age of galaxies; stars such as white dwarves and red giants have precise dates of birth and death; geophysicists have dated the age of the Earth; biologists have dated the appearance of microbes and the destruction of species; paleoanthropologists have dated each of the hominids that appeared before *Homo sapiens*; linguists have dated the birth of the languages they study; and so on.

As a result, we now have what Serres has called a “*un grand récit*”, a great narrative, a grand story, about the universe. The big bang (if it indeed happened) took place 13.8 billion years ago; the accretion of the Earth occurred 4.5 billion years ago; life appeared 3.7 billion years ago; human beings evolved around 2.3 million years ago. Astrophysicists have even calculated the end of all these processes in what they call “the big crunch,” a terminal catastrophe in a singular collapse. This great narrative—which in a sense has replaced the Enlightenment notion of the encyclopedia—is one of the great discoveries of our era: the diverse sciences have been gathered together in a single narrative that runs from the origin to the end of time—even if we know it will be modified and even surpassed, and even if it is hardly a straightforward narrative.¹¹ One might note that Jean-François Lyotard, in his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition*, had written of the

end of grand narratives, but, somewhat ironically, he was writing at the very moment when the sciences, almost behind his back, were putting in place one of the most coherent visions of the cosmos that has ever existed.¹²

There are several features we can observe in this development of a cosmic philosophy within the sciences themselves.

First, *time* has become the fundamental element of universe and knowledge. We can ask the speculative question about what took place “before” the Big Bang, but the question seems moot, because time itself, as well as space and even what we like to think of as the “universal” laws of Nature, seem to have been themselves constituted in the Big Bang. In other words, what underlies the universality of laws is the contingency of time. For this reason, Connolly’s canon of preferred philosophers are all philosophers, not of the cosmos *per se*, but of time, process, duration, and becoming.

Parenthetically, I presume this is why Connolly has difficulties reconciling himself with Whitehead’s doctrine of “eternal objects”—a doctrine, he says, that Whitehead perhaps “overplays.”¹³ Connolly prefers to see eternal objects as evolutionary tendencies toward *patterns* or “pre-adaptations” (exaptations) that get taken up in new ways—as, for example, “the wings of primitive birds set pre-adaptations from which the limbs of animals evolved,” or “the amygdala, the primitive brain node in reptiles, acquires new functions and abilities as it joins others in the human body-brain-culture network.”¹⁴ In this way, Connolly in effect *temporalizes* Whitehead’s eternal objects, turning them into “flexible enabling conditions” that set limits from which creative evolution can proceed.¹⁵ This is a provocative proposal, though I not qualified to assess its actual relation to Whitehead’s own concept of eternal objects.

Second, this contingent time has been constantly bifurcating. As Stephen Jay Gould used to say, rewind the tape, and everything would have played out differently. In other words, nothing was foreseeable or predictable. Like the appearance of stars and the appearance of life, humans are simply one bifurcation among others in this temporal unfolding of the universe. Replay the tape, and perhaps the dinosaurs would still be ruling the Earth, or the planet may never have formed. It is only retrospection that allows us to gather these disparate events into a unique narrative—what Bergson called the “retroactive movement of the true.”

Third—and this is a particularly striking theme in Connolly’s book—this narrative marks the end of human-centered history. It has forced upon us a reconciliation of what C. P. Snow once called the “two cultures,” namely, the humanities and the sciences. Until recently, educated persons had access to what we still call “recorded history”—notably, the history of writing—which accounts for seven or eight thousand years of humanity. Today, we know that we have 15 billion years of written history behind us, but it is a tradition written, not by humanity, but by Nature itself. (Consider the wonderful title of Neil Shubin’s bestselling book, *Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5 Billion-Year History of the Human Body*.)¹⁶ I may belong to a “Western” tradition, or even a “Judeo-Christian-Greek” mode of thought, but beyond that lies a far deeper

history: my jaw is a modification of the gills of fish, and as Connolly notes, the species of microbes that live in my gut and digest my food have been around for over 3 billion years (49). My body is part of this vast history of what John McPhee has called “deep time,” so deep that it is often hard for us to grasp. We ourselves are microcosms of the temporality of the universe, since we contain in ourselves the totality of these times; they are, as it were, condensed in our bodies, and it is now this vast retrospective history that the sciences and the humanities together are starting to write.

What is humanity? It is constituted by individual lives that, recently and in rare places, have life spans of seventy to eighty years, which are part of collective cultures that, at best, endure a few millennia, which are themselves plunged into the evolution of a species, *Homo sapiens*, which dates back a couple million years, itself plunged into a long duration of living beings going back four billion years, itself, finally, composed of elements that were forged around 13 billion years ago. In short, each of us incorporates and integrates, in our bodies, in imperceptible ways, an enormous temporal duration that extends back billions of years, far further than what we have hitherto considered to be “human history”—even if this temporality rarely if ever enters our consciousness.

5. The “Technium” as Our Prosthetic Body

Now alongside this “grand narrative” of the universe, there is a second and parallel narrative, which is perhaps a more interesting one. Not only can we date the age of the universe and the earth, we can also date the discoveries of the techniques of measurement that produced this grand narrative—and they are all, of course, quite recent. We extract ice-core samples from Greenland and Antarctica, which go back 800,000 years, and cores from the deep sea, which go back over 200 million years. Radiocarbon dating, based on the decay of carbon-14, allows organic materials to be dated back to about 50,000 years, and recent developments have allowed geochronologists to date more and more with less and less, in part through the use of isotopes with vast half-lives, from uranium-235 to samarium-147, which function as natural geologic clocks. Edwin Hubble measured the red shift of light to discover that the universe was expanding, and analyses of the red shift of certain galaxies in the Hubble Deep Field have revealed them to date back to more than 13 billion years, currently our furthest view into deep time.

One could cite many more examples, but here too there are several observations that we can make.

First, we have two parallel narratives: the history of the universe (the grand narrative), but also the history of the development of the techniques of measurement and dating that collectively produced and sustain this Grand Narrative. The two narratives are reciprocally determined; indeed, one might say that they are *one and the same narrative*. When we talk about the history of the universe, we are really talking about the history of the technologies that have produced our scientific knowledge of the universe.

Second, it means that things themselves are memories; they contain time, they contain memories, and it is precisely this memory that our instruments decipher.

Third, these instruments are themselves forms of embodiment. Technical artifacts are often seen to be prosthetic, that is, they are externalizations of the body. I can pound a stake into the ground with my fist, but I do a much better job with a hammer, which mimics and externalizes my forearm and fist. Similarly, clothing externalizes the skin, a baby's bottle externalizes its mother's breast; a stove externalizes the stomach; and so on. In Bernard Steigler's words, "as a 'process of externalization,' technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life."¹⁷ From this viewpoint, what we call "scientific instruments" constitute a vast sensorium spread out in a space like an extension of our organic body: telescopic eyes that magnify and record light on film (like the Hubble telescope, or its soon-to-be successor, the Webb telescope); radio dishes like enormous ears that listen to the heavenly noise; seismographs like vast fingers and nerve endings that sense the slightest tremor in the ground; or colliders that allow to register the effects of particle collisions, as in the recent discovery of the Higgs boson.

It is true that I can still go out into a field and look at the stars with what we now call, revealingly, the "unaided" eye, but science begins when I take a clump of matter and fashion it into a recording instrument, placing it between myself and the stars. Materially, the telescope places me further from the stars, since my eyes no longer have direct access to them; but sensorially and cognitively I am much closer, not only because the telescope, as a prosthetic eye, can gather much more light than my own, and not only because it is able to "see" wavelengths of light inaccessible to my organic eye (not only visible light, but infrared, ultraviolet, radio emissions, x-rays, and so on), but because it can inscribe this light permanently on a recording surface, such as a photograph, turning it into a manipulable piece of data.

In short, in addition to the story of the cosmos, there is also this parallel story of our extended technological body, which Kevin Kelly has called the "technium."¹⁸ The technium has given us an extraordinary access to the world, to the cosmos; but at the same time, one could say that it has also made us lose the world, since most of us rarely leave the confines of our extended bodies—our homes and workplaces, our cars, our computers. Nature has become primarily an Arcadian Nature, a place for vacations and tourism, sport and relaxation.

6. Tectonic Thinking

The strength of *The Fragility of Things* is it that it provides us a way of thinking through the consequences of these changes in a novel manner. While Connolly often calls his approach an "ecological" approach, one might equally call it a "tectonic" mode of thought, given the analysis of the Lisbon earthquake that frames the book. The science of tectonic plates, developed in the 1930s, revealed that the geologic forms we see on the surface of the Earth are the product of deep tectonic shifts that can take ages to manifest themselves. (In 1755, the population of Lisbon, for instance, had no way of knowing that their earthquake had taken place on what is now called the Azores-Gibraltar Transform Fault, where pressure had been building for years.)

Similarly, a tectonic approach to history and politics might attempt to decipher, under the noisy events of headlines and political tensions, the movements of these slow-moving and largely hidden tectonic plates, whose effects can suddenly erupt at the surface, seemingly out of nowhere.

An example: when I use the word “we,” it would be easy, and not incorrect, to take this as meaning “we Westerners.” But East and West are surface phenomena, and a tectonic approach might isolate far different characteristics. For instance, “we” might refer the population of people who brush their teeth regularly, and at some point in their life have taken a painkiller such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen. These two traits, seemingly mundane, would no doubt include many people on the planet, but by no means all of them; and they would cut across our usual groupings that appeal to criteria of ethnicity or nationality, or race, class, or gender. Yet they are hardly mundane factors. Until recently, few humans had a full set of teeth; life was punctuated by excruciating toothaches and painful extractions, and more generally, by perpetual suffering. But this has changed: since World War II, “we” have reaped the benefits, thanks to the development of analgesics, antibiotics, and anaesthetics, of a medicine that, for the first time since Hippocrates and Galen, has become both efficacious and quotidian. As a result, our relation to suffering, health, life, death, our bodies—ourselves—has mutated. Just as the earth has become a new object for us, subject to human actions, so our own bodies have become new objects for us, and we can now exercise over them a hitherto unimaginable control.

This transformation of bodies—of health—is a profound “tectonic” shift that has had the effect, on the surface, of recomposing our religions, our morality, our politics, and even our aesthetics. If religions, in part, were a response to the problem of suffering, have they altered to the degree that the experience of suffering has declined? Similarly, do moralities change when populations confront less and less daily pain and hunger? Politically, we now demand health, security, a long life, food without risks, and a mastery of our reproductive capacities, which in turn has generated issues concerning the administration of health care, the financial power of pharmaceutical companies, and the denial of drugs to the third- and fourth-worlds. Even our bodily aesthetics have altered: rich Elizabethans wore collars to hide skin scarred by the pox, and Louis XIV wore perfume to cover over the stench of his body; now, humans expose their nude bodies on beaches. And this altered relation to our bodies has indeed penetrated daily life, producing a new “we” that brushes their teeth every day, and that keep a bottle of painkillers (religion-destroyers) ready-at-hand in their domicile to keep their bodily sufferings at bay.

This is only one of many examples that one can extrapolate from Connolly’s analyses, almost at random. But in numerous areas—health, agriculture, transportation, religion, demographics, history—one can sense deep and slowly drifting tectonic shifts that are sometimes barely perceptible, but are often far more important than the surface events that bombard us in the media. And like the Lisbon earthquake, a slippage in one of these domains can suddenly

propagate enormous changes. What is exemplary about *The Fragility of Things* is Connolly's ability to undertake these types of "geological" analyses of our current situation, perhaps not unlike the *long durée* of the Annales historians.

7. Political Theory

Finally, how is all this related to political theory? Connolly's critiques of neo-liberalism, as various conceived, are persuasive, at least to me. In my case, perhaps, he is preaching to the converted, but I was converted in part through reading Connolly's books. Neo-liberalism, in one version, reduces the socio-economic domain to a game between two players: markets versus the State. On one side, there are "self-organizing markets with beautiful powers of rational self-adjustment," and on the other side, pitted against them, there are "states as clumsy agents of collective decision."¹⁹

More to the point is Connolly's claim that neoliberals adhere to the idea of "the purity of the model."²⁰ It reminds me of a devout Catholic friend I knew in grad school, who was critical of every aspect of the contemporary Catholic church—its hierarchy, its abuses, its hypocrisy, its doctrines—but whom was nonetheless entirely devoted to the "Idea" of the Church in its purity, as it were, even if few aspects of that Idea had ever been realized in the actually existing institution. The friend seemed to love and hate the Church at one and the same time: loved the Idea, hated the reality. Free-market fundamentalists tend to think about markets in exactly the same manner: love the Idea, despise the reality. They believe fervently in the timeless Idea of the pure free market, but constantly complain that actually existing markets are always infected by the meddlesome interferences of the State. Of course, Connolly likes to point out the fact that that they nonetheless need the State "to promote, protect, and expand market processes."²¹

I was particularly intrigued, however, by Connolly's chapter on Friedrich Hayek, because he sees in Hayek both an enemy and a friend. An enemy, because Hayek is a neo-liberal, even if a moderate one; but a friend, because Hayek sees markets as self-organizing systems, and this is a model that Connolly himself adopts. Against Hayek, Connolly simply insists that "creativity and spontaneity are not confined to economic markets,"²² and that we have to recognize that there are different "modes of self-organization," such as *symbiogenesis* and *teleodynamism*. All of these models help contribute to our "palpable sense of fragility."²³ What we therefore need, Connolly argues, is "to extend our political...sensibilities"²⁴ so as to incorporate a consideration of "non-human force fields" (such as the Lisbon earthquake) in the ways we have outlined above.

But this is precisely the political problem the book attempts to confront, for neo-liberalism is *not* interested in extending its political sensibility. "Neoliberalism," Connolly writes, "tends either to downgrade the importance of nonhuman force fields to contemporary capitalism, or to pretend that markets will take care of their effects in time."²⁵ For instance, if the neoliberal strategy toward climate change is to deny it, or at least to defer any action on it, it is because

“acknowledgment of it would require a [rather massive] transformation of state, production, market, and consumptions priorities,”²⁶ which neo-liberalism has no desire to undertake or even encourage.

If this is the case, and neoliberalism is rampant everywhere, how can the extension of our political sensibilities take place, if everything seems set against it? Connolly offers some modest suggestions in his conclusion, focusing on role of experimentation, and later, on what Foucault called the affect of itself by itself. It is certainly true that altering processes of subjectivation can be effective. Daston and Galison, in their wonderful book called *Obectivity*, have an excellent chapter called “The Scientific Self,” where they argue that being a scientist implies a specific type of subjectivation, which is very different from, say, a scholar. A scholar needs a library, whereas a scientist needs a laboratory, and each comes with entirely different sets of affects and skills.²⁷

But here, perhaps, is another way of posing the problem. As I was writing this, a survey on scientific knowledge in America was released to the media, and it reported the following results: only 20 percent of the people polled “believed” in the Big Bang and only 27 percent thought the Earth was 4.5 billion years old. Most press accounts turned these poll results into a story about the dismal ignorance of science in the US, which is no doubt true. At the same time, 82 percent of the people polled thought that smoking causes cancer and 65 percent believed that overusing antibiotics causes the development of drug resistant bacteria.²⁸ Those still are not impressive numbers (apparently 18 percent of the US population deny that smoking causes cancer), but they point to a slightly different conclusion: people have less trouble comprehending something close to them (smoking causes cancer) than they have comprehending something far away from them in time and space (the big bang, or the age of the earth). So the question of how we can extend our political sensibilities might be rephrased as: How do we get people to move from the near to the far?

On this question, one might contrast two classic thinkers in political philosophy: Hobbes and Hume. Put simply, whereas Hobbes thought humans were *egoists*, whereas Hume thought they were *partial*. For Hobbes, for society to be possible, human egos need to be limited, and all theories of the social contract posited the social problem as a limitation or even renunciation of natural rights. Hume, by contrast, said that humans were not egotistical but partial, and he developed a well-known concept of sympathy from his theory of association: Our primary sympathies are for our parents and relatives (causality), those near to us (contiguity), and those like ourselves (resemblance).²⁹ Family, neighbors, friends—these are the natural determinations of sympathy.

But the problem with sympathy, as the survey shows, is that it is partial and limited to what is closest to us. As a result, it entails a fundamental change in the practical position of the social problem. The problem is no longer: how can we limit human egoisms and their corresponding natural rights?; but rather, how can we extend human sympathies beyond their natural limitations? Hume does not think of society as a system of legal and contractual limitations, but as a positive institutional invention. How, he asks, can we invent artifices—how can we create

artificial institutions—that force the passions to go beyond their partiality in order to form moral, juridical, political, and aesthetic sentiments? In Connolly’s terms, could such artifices serve to extend our political sensibilities into non-human force fields?

How such institutions might function, or how they might bring about new processes of subjectivation, as Connolly suggests, is an open question. In a sense, the problem Connolly has posed in his book is not dissimilar to the problem of our relation to death, our being-toward-death, as Heidegger says. Intellectually, at least, we all know we are going to die; but existentially, we tend to flee our death. Similarly, we know, intellectually, that we live on a tiny planet in a vast cosmos; we know that species on this planet have been extinguished numerous times; and we know that it is possible for us to extinguish ourselves. But perhaps the reason it is difficult to develop a cosmic political sensibility is because our being-toward-the-cosmos is not that different from our being-toward-death as a species. So we flee from it. Perhaps. In any case, this is why the problem that Connolly has addressed in *The Fragility of Things* is no doubt one of the most pressing problems of our time.

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Notes

1. William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013).

2. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 7.

3. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973), 361: “The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz, but the visible disaster of the first nature was insignificant in comparison with the second, social one, which defines human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil.”

4. William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), chapter 3, 39-67.

5. See Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), esp. 1-3. Wikipedia has a page for the painting that includes an image: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight_with_Cudgels.

6. Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 2011). Connolly at one point calls it the “cosmo-political dimension” (*Fragility of Things*, p. 171).

7. Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard, ed. Christopher Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 287 (translation modified).

8. Gilles Deleuze uses this phrase to summarize Stoic ethics; see his *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale; ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149.

9. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

10. See Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 131, 132, 17.

11. For his concept of the *grand récit*, see Michel Serres, *L’Incandescent* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2003), 9-39.

12. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

13. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 163.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Neil Shubin, *Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5-Billion-Year History of the Human Body* (New York: Vintage, 2009).

17. Bernard Steigler, *Technics and Time*, Vol. 1, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 17.

18. Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 11-17.

19. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 31.

20. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 26.

21. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 21.

22. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 77.

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26. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 137.

27. Lorraine J. Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 191-251.

28. http://ap-gfkpoll.com/main/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AP-GfK-March-2014-Poll-Topline-Final_SCIENCE.pdf. Accessed 23 April 2014.

29. On the application of the principles of association to the notion of sympathy, see David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 483-4: "A man naturally loves his children better than his nephews, his nephews better than his cousins, his cousins better than strangers, where everything else is equal. Hence arise our common measures of duty, in preferring the one to the other." Adam Smith took up the concept of sympathy, but in a different manner than Hume.

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