

BEND, ENGAGE, WAIT, AND WATCH:
RETHINKING POLITICAL AGENCY IN A WORLD OF FLOWS

by

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ABSTRACT

We inhabit an era of accelerated pace and a precarity of being that rivals vulnerabilities encountered regularly by the Greek polis. And yet our operative conceptions of political agency have yet to catch up with this condition. Drawing initially upon Sophocles and Lucretius, this study seeks to retune modern models of agency to fit the late-modern condition. As you work creatively upon Sophocles to appreciate the swerve in Lucretius, the wisdom of minor characters in his tragic trilogy becomes even more visible, particularly as they respond with flexibility and insight to surprising events and binds. We next turn to Catherine Malabou's exploration of body/brain "plasticity", to bolster and extend these insights. Friedrich Nietzsche is drawn upon to teach us the importance of periodic hesitation, as we allow multifarious intensities to work upon us in the hopes that a new, creative response will bubble up to respond to an uncanny event. The focus on flexibility, plasticity, periodic hesitation, creativity, and cultivation of existential gratitude is carried into contemporary life through an analysis of media techniques adopted by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. By parodying the rhythm, pace and tone of news programs, these commentators teach us both how the media work on the passive syntheses that infuse agency and how we can turn its operations into creative political thinking and action. The study ends by examining Machiavelli on the precarious relations between *virtu* and *fortuna* through the lens of these strategies, doing so to retune our practices of political agency.

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Introduction

“To impose upon becoming the character of being—that is the supreme will to power.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 330

Theorizing what the subject is and how it acts sometimes takes a back seat to other questions addressed in the political theory canon. It can get crowded out by questions of power, identity, language, governance, legitimacy, culture, democracy, recognition, violence, equality, institutions, coercion, group formation, regime type, rationality, revolution, sovereignty, justice, liberty, and/or interests. But any work done on these concepts necessarily includes some notion of what a subject is and how it acts, though that aspect of the work may not be thematized upfront. Indeed, interpretations of subjectivity are often taken for granted in political theory: they are smuggled into theories unknowingly, inherited from concepts of politics developed (or assumed) centuries ago, taken as a settled or resolved questions not worth addressing, or cajoled to fit the larger theory in play after the fact. For example: a successful theory of free-market capitalism might rely on some version of an autonomous, rational, self-interested sovereign subject making decisions in an environment where everyone is assumed to be doing the same. Marxists often argue that this form of the subject was inserted into the theory *after* a system of capitalism was already in play; a particular subject was retroactively presupposed as the initial foundation of a capitalist system. For those sympathetic to this interpretation, the ‘state of nature’ is an originary fiction from which the principles of a

free-market system logically follow, but the story was developed to fit the market, rather than the other way around. Without a particular type of subject and a strong notion of individual agency, the political and economic structures of capitalism become incoherent. Exploring or theorizing a type of subjectivity or a mode of agency distinct from the forms that match capitalist principles erodes the political justifications for such a system.

The question of agency as it relates to subjectivity¹ is a crucial one if we are to address a host of questions and themes that persist in political theory. If our contemporary condition is marked by accelerating rates of change in several areas of life (Connolly 2002), resulting in an increased prevalence of unanticipated events, any attempt to theorize agency would do well to find ways to better respond to this state of affairs. For my part, I would like to move away from more rigid, robust notions of sovereign subjects that seem incompatible with and inadequate for a world of becoming,² in favor of paying attention to minor, indirect, and partial modes of agency.³ These modes of agency, I contend, are better equipped to anticipate and respond to the creative emergence of unpredictable processes and outcomes. In addition, opting for a less masterful agentic mode, with the understanding that we are not the only relevant factors in the outcome of an event, may mitigate feelings of *ressentiment* that tend to rear their head when things do not turn out the way we had imagined. I also contend that our interventions are more likely to yield more favorable results when they attend to these

¹ Subjectivity and agency here can refer to human or non-human forms. Although much of the work done on this project focuses on human subjectivity and human agency, I do not theorize the limits of that subjectivity or agency from the outset.

² It's possible that there was never a time in which this model of sovereignty effectively fit political conditions. There are plenty of thinkers who have theorized an alternate form of subjectivity over the centuries, some of whom will be addressed in this work.

³ See Bennett's discussion of minor agency in *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

softer registers of agency, though there are no guarantees of a particular outcome when we are only one component of the unfolding action.

Toward that end, I favor a model of the subject that is constituted but incomplete, always on its way to something else, along with its surroundings. I take subjectivity to be a collective enterprise, in which a subject's milieu constitutes the subject in important and inextricable ways. I am drawn to a subject positioned between deterministic teleology and autonomous free will; we find ourselves in a world already constituted, and we act in this world under a set of changing conditions (we also play a role in the trajectory of those transformations). In this sense, subjectivity involves being *subject to* changing conditions, as well as acting within and on the conditions to which we are subject.

In order to think subjectivity and agency in terms that are more amenable to our contemporary condition, I theorize four different strategies for acting in the world. These strategies emerge in part from a minor tradition of thinkers who are attentive to more modest forms of agency. I begin by exploring the dissonant conjunctions between Lucretius' theory of the swerve—in which an otherwise predictable chain of events shifts trajectory for indiscernible reasons—and Sophocles' depiction of tragedy in his *Oedipus* trilogy. In this space, I propose a model of agency that is flexible, and thus better adjusts to the effects of the swerve than more rigid, stubborn alternatives exhibited by several of Sophocles' main characters. Several minor characters in Sophocles' plays disclose a degree of *flexibility* as they encounter complex and unanticipated events, and I argue that Sophocles tends to favor these characters over those major characters who opt for rigidified stubbornness in the face of changing circumstances. Some characters transition

from a more rigid approach to a more flexible one as they come to realize the complexity of the world and the relatively small influence they have on the outcome of events.

Sophocles complicates certain understandings of agency (sovereign and unitary ones, for instance) while illustrating a few that might be better adapted to a world marked by a Lucretian swerve.

In the second chapter, I analyze a degree of *plasticity* in the neural network—that combination of one’s brain, body, and milieu—that results in ongoing changes that take place ‘in the open air’ of one’s environment. Following Catherine Malabou’s lead, I take the term ‘plasticity’ to denote the ability both to take new forms and to give new forms as our neural networks are *constituted by* and *respond to* our surroundings. (Malabou 2008)

By connecting a plastic neural network to a mode of subjectivity and a correlative interpretation of agency, our understanding of what it means to act as a subject is stretched in new ways: we are the *agents*, the *project*, and the *result* of our work on our neural networks, even if that result cannot be predicted in advance. I argue that the neuroplasticity of the network can best be described as subjectivity actualizing from the virtual. A notion of virtuality denotes the way we are always on our way to becoming something new that cannot be anticipated. Subjectivity on the way is a potentially creative process of actualization. I then explore ways in which this mode of agency might be taken up to draw from this creative potential, through the use of art and video games. My goal is to look for the virtual *in* the actual, drawing it from existing elements even while it provides the potential for something new. A neural network that is actualizing

from the rich terrain of the virtual captures the creative potential latent in existing elements of the network. As agents, we play a role in how that virtuality actualizes.

In the third chapter, I propose that one important mode of agency involves deferring action for a period of time when unexpected situations or rapidly changing conditions are encountered. There are times when a moment of repose may be the most effective reaction to a situation, even (or especially) when one experiences immense social and political pressure to intervene immediately. The goal of this moment of repose is to allow for a temporal space in which new ideas or options may arise among changing conditions in a world of flow. The pause gives us not only an opportunity to better evaluate the scene and the trajectory of the action, but also holds the potential for new options to emerge. The emergent options may be preferable to the initial range of choices, but they are unavailable or invisible until a moment of repose is taken. As an example of this, I take up Judith Butler's work on cases in which children's genitalia do not clearly identify bodies as definitively male or female. When this ambiguity is encountered, the pressure (from parents and the medical community, among others) to eliminate or mitigate it is immense. In a world where gender is understood as a strict duality, there are strong forces pushing for the annihilation of any middle space between the genders. The immediate impulse, it seems, is to push the body to one side or the other, by whatever means necessary. Butler argues that several problems may arise from these high-risk procedures, and she challenges the rigid two-gender understanding of human bodies. Instead of opting for a surgical or medical procedure, a preferable option may be to simply *wait*—to defer a decision to modify the body to fit into one of the two

natural/biological categories of gender. A moment of repose, in this case, may expand the range of options available to the child in later years. It also leaves room for perspectives on the duality of gender to change over time, making new choices available that may not have registered in the initial case. For Butler, avoiding a disfiguring and unsafe medical procedure in favor of waiting might be the best way to “do justice” to the child who cannot make the decision on her own and will have to live with the consequences. (Butler 2004) Sometimes *inaction* is the best way to avoid foreclosing on alternative opportunities to act in the future.

As a fourth mode of agency, I take up the role of spectatorship. Rather than viewing spectating as a passive mode of observation, I cast it as an active mode of micropolitical experience. As examples, I turn to two programs on the cable television network Comedy Central: *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert. Their distinctive use of parody disrupts and disturbs established modes of broadcast news through satirical mimicry, exaggeration, and iteration. I argue that the combination of news networks, Stewart, and Colbert generates a feedback loop in which the audience forms a set of subterranean tools for *spectating* differently. The emergent configuration of the existing media landscape, Jon Stewart’s particular sense of watchdog comedy, and Stephen Colbert’s performative parody of talking heads produces a productive mechanism for disrupting particular modes of knowledge creation. When we watch Stewart and Colbert in conjunction with news networks, a small space opens up for creative thinking. We can more easily recognize and subvert particular techniques deployed by non-satirical news programs by seeing their exaggerated forms on Comedy

Central. Such experimental media strategies are more effective at exposing the way major news networks favor viewership over an attempt to responsibly report important events. In the resulting creative space, new ideas may come to the fore that would have been missed without the relation between Comedy Central and news media.

Finally, I conclude with some thoughts about how we might determine which mode of agency might be beneficial at different times. Ultimately, there are no universal rules for making this determination. I borrow from Machiavelli's advice in *The Prince*, in which he contends that a good prince—one with *virtu*—will know how best to improvise and creatively react when conditions change in unanticipated ways. (Machiavelli 1988) *Fortuna*—all of those elements outside of the agent's control—makes for a constantly changing set of circumstances for the prince to navigate. In order to be effective, a prince possessing *virtu* will carefully read each scene before deciding how best to intervene. Surveying the action carefully will help demote certain approaches while favoring others. By my reading, the same is true of agents more generally. Acting effectively may include remaining *flexible* when conditions change. It may include undertaking the collective and individual self-work necessary to play a role in the plastic development of the neural network, giving form as well as taking form. It may include opting to defer action for a period of time while the scene is more carefully evaluated and newly emerging options can be considered. Or, it may include producing or watching subversive satirical media designed to disrupt conceptions of authoritative fact-telling and encourage a virtual and creative space for new ideas. Because each situation requires its own approach to intervention, a subject possessing *virtu* will try to match a strategy for intervention with

the particular set of conditions at hand, and she will shy away from making hard-and-fast rules about how to act that do not take into consideration the spatial, cultural, and temporal context of the situation encountered.

On its own, each of these modes of agency is insufficient for intervening in a world of becoming. Even when we take them as a menu of options, they will be found wanting in certain cases. There are myriad others that are also amenable to a world marked by occasional surprise and unanticipated experiences. The goal of this project is to begin clearing terrain for thinking about forms of agency that do not rely on a sovereign, autonomous, masterful subject *or* on a deterministic subject who lacks a will entirely. A space in between (or adjacent to) these two extremes illuminates an indirect, partial agency of a constituted subject contextualized in a milieu. This subject works within a constrained set of options, and often intervenes in smaller, less noticeable ways, but may be better equipped to encourage favorable outcomes while avoiding the *ressentiment*-laden reactions that crop up when circumstances outside one's control change rapidly or in unexpected ways.

Chapter 1

A Tragic Vision of the Swerve

The goal of staging a conversation that never took place between the Greek tragedian Sophocles and the Roman materialist Titus Lucretius Carus is to forge lines of connection between what Sophocles saw as the nature of tragedy and what Lucretius called the *clinamen*, or the swerve. Although removed from each other by several centuries, I propose that their sensibilities about the world overlap. From Sophocles, the great playwright who is often treated as a figure of despair, I want to recover a sense of modesty and care for the world, along with a sense that even our most deeply buried and fundamental understandings of life remain disputable. Sophocles impresses upon us that the more certain we are of the way things will unfold, the more dangerous the position we occupy. He calls our attention to moments when things could have developed differently, but because of the way particular events unfolded in unexpected ways, the trajectory of action in the plot takes a turn, ultimately resulting in a radically different set of events than first expected. For Lucretius, a lesser-known epic poet and a follower of Epicurus, the occasional and seemingly negligible interruption in the laminar flow of atoms is responsible for the difference between the world we inhabit today and a world that did not come to be. A swerve causes an encounter, and the history of such encounters eventually produces the material world we inhabit. There is no discernible cause for the swerve of one atom into another, or at least none that can be identified. Yet the resulting

pile-up eventually gives rise to the creative and unexpected actualization of the material world.

So we have a swerve. And a tragic vision. How can they be connected, and what can they teach us about politics and philosophy? What does the world look like if we attend to potential imbrications between these two ideas? What differences crop up when we emphasize such minor themes in Lucretius and Sophocles rather than the major themes of sovereign agency, bold action in power politics, a clean nature/human divide, or the notion of democratic politics based on rational choice operative in political-philosophical thought today? The figures of the tragic upshot and the swerve constitute the beginnings of what Gilles Deleuze calls a “minor literature” that can be traced through the history of Western philosophy, literature, and politics, although the thread’s tracks sometimes disappear for a few centuries at a time. There may be some value to recovering such a minor tradition of thought; there may be some merit to seeing what political approaches become available when it is given center stage, and what common political tactics begin to appear strange. If there is something to be gleaned from these two disparate thinkers about unexpected turns of events, how can those lessons be incorporated into our understandings of politics today and used to develop analyses better suited to it? My hunch is that their confluence can have a significant impact on a set of political concepts that appeared to be ‘already settled.’

Pursuing these two approaches side by side poses some additional difficulties and benefits. The degree to which they are philosophically, chronologically, and thematically distant from each other makes working with the pair a challenge. But, it also offers the

opportunity to use one thinker to nudge or pull the other in a direction that he did not go on his own, allowing pressures from one set of sensibilities to bleed into the other set, producing a massaged version of both that may not have appeared on its own. The goal is to balance fidelity to their texts with an exploration of latent possibilities not taken with each. I want to allow Sophocles and Lucretius to inform each other and both to inform us. What follows is an exploration of the convergences that emerge from their theoretical conversation. My goal is to emphasize themes which may have been considered background noise when read alone as the trajectory of one author's approach unfolds within the text of the other.

Preliminary Affinities

Lucretius' major work, *De Rerum Natura*, is an epos, meaning that it includes "both narrative poems on the deeds of heroes...and didactic poems that give instruction in some body of knowledge" (Gillespie and Hardie 2007, I). What is at stake is nothing less than a description of 'the way things are' and a guide to readers for approaching life. In writing it, Lucretius breathes life into both the work of the thinker who inspired him⁴—the Greek materialist Epicurus—and those primordial bodies that may appear to be most lifeless and at rest. According to Lucretius, the appearance of rest is just that, for there is a degree of vitality within all that we encounter, whether the ancient ideas of Epicurus or a stone conventionally dismissed as motionless. In a world composed of atoms in motion,

⁴ Gillespie and Hardie refer to Lucretius' work as at least in part a "celebration of the godlike achievement of Lucretius' philosophical hero Epicurus" (Gillespie and Hardie 2007, I).

everything becomes active, and although we can't detect the tiny movements of miniscule bodies, we can certainly detect their effects on a larger scale. The world, as well as our own bodies, becomes procreative rather than merely existent, in a state of becoming more than one of being. And, while certain events do unfold in ways that we've seen before and can expect to recur, because these tiny bodies are constantly in motion and colliding with each other, there is no reliable way to predict the ultimate trajectory of events.

Lucretius' work gives us the resources to break from at least two metaphysical blueprints or traditions that remain prevalent in theology, science, and philosophy. The first is a providential vision of the world, in which a supernatural being (or beings, or forces) controls the fate of the world and those that occupy it. The providential model involves a persistent belief in a teleological path that has been determined by forces larger than us. In some Roman and Greek traditions, contingency in the world is retained by describing a host of conflicting supernatural figures,⁵ whose encounters with each other ultimately yield the result that emerges. In this sense, destiny's trajectory remains out of our reach, but it is not pre-ordained. Or is it? Those of us who are not deities can do little more than observe the way things unfold at the hands of the gods. A revised version of this providential world would become a major point of contention for Nietzsche, who believed that a Christian version of providence resulted in a collection of dangerous problems, not the least of which is *ressentiment*, or a resentment toward the

⁵ Sometimes these figures are considered to be material, made up of the same matter that makes up all of us. Other times, the gods are considered to transcend material existence. When this is the case, the gods are not governed by the same limitations that matter places on us here on earth. In many cases, the supernatural is the genesis of the material component of reality, and thus sits outside its confines and limitations.

passing of time. A providential universe mediates our agency; our role in the action is small or non-existent in a world shaped by supernatural forces or beings.

In the second blueprint, providence is replaced by a system of universal and natural laws and efficient causality. In this case, the universe and all of its contents are governed by a discernible set of laws that apply equally to all things. Contingency is covered over by complexity—the world yields predictable results for each situation, though those results can be difficult to calculate without a comprehensive set of data (which can be hard to come by). But, the closer we come to collecting all of the pertinent information, the closer we come to being able to predict what will occur in advance. When we are wrong, it is not because natural laws are not universal or were not in play in this particular instance. Rather, it is a matter of miscalculation or failing to get all of the right information. Or, it could be because we do not have the proper techniques of inquiry necessary to evaluate the data set. Next time, given a few corrections, we can get it right.

In the first blueprint, determinism is found at the level of the gods' interactions. In the second, determinism lies in the fundamental and immutable laws of the universe that can, in principle, be described by human subjects.⁶ Lucretius pushes back against strong *or* weak determinisms, and affirms a world of complexity and creativity that is matter in motion all the way down. He starts with speculation about the most basic elements and builds from there. An infinite number of atoms—those basic elements of materiality—

⁶ A third model might presuppose absolute chaos in a radically under-determined universe, in which nothing is determined, predictable, or consistent. This would be a difficult world to theorize in or about, but I will try to address this type of approach in a few different ways. An injection of this line of thinking into a deterministic universe can be a healthy overcorrection at times, but ultimately I don't think it is credible enough to yield politically productive options for us as agents.

rain down in laminar flow, until suddenly, and unexpectedly, one drifts from its lane for an instant. The resulting collision with its neighbor causes another collision, sparking chain reactions of unknown duration and intensity. There are a finite number of atom types, but an infinite number of atoms. Thus, the combinations of atoms are also limitless (Lucretius 1968, 47, 49). The world as we know it is the result of particular sets of collisions that have occurred since the beginning of the cosmos. For Lucretius, an element of contingency is thus sewn into the very fabric of the material world. Neither a group of gods nor a set of fundamental laws of physics is sufficient to describe this material existence; the swerve happens for no discernible reason and results in an outcome that cannot be predicted in advance.

Like Lucretius, Sophocles seems to believe that the world is too complex and dynamic to be captured by a model of either deterministic causality or providential oversight. Lucretius comes to this conclusion after looking closely at the material world—the world of atoms. It is unclear whether Sophocles himself was a fatalist of a non-providential sort or a playwright whose plays convey dramatic moments of contingency. But it seems clear that his plays *can* be read in the latter way. Sophocles composes his dramatic plots in such a way as to also convey possible elements of indeterminacy in the universe. For example, his use of double entendres, tension, multiple points of view, minor and major characters, and significant shifts in dramatic trajectory that come as surprises to one or more characters are consistent with an idea of real creativity. The attempt to shore up this indeterminacy through power politics and heroic, bold action based on an adherence to a stable set of principles is often ineffective at best;

at worst, it incurs tragic consequences. Sophocles' development of what Nietzsche would later call a tragic vision embraces the unexpected unfolding of events that are neither determined in advance nor under the reliable control of any human agents. As a result, a more modest vision of human agency must be introduced if we are to avoid resenting a world that refuses to yield to our biddings. This mediated agency requires small interventions in a swirling and complicated world of the swerve, in which human actors are not the only actors that contribute to the outcome of events. In order to be successful in this complex climate of fluctuating assemblages, efforts must be less direct and more patient, timely, sensitive, and carefully staged. Even then, there are no guarantees. Things can go horribly wrong—they can take a swerve for the worse. And when they do, a mortal who has developed tragic and material wisdom is more apt to have the resources to respond or recover more effectively than the sovereign agent who is convinced of her own power to control events in a world of human mastery.

Unsurprisingly, Sophocles is not explicit about the framework caged by his dramas. It emerges as certain characters demonstrate it at certain points throughout the text. On my reading, both his method and his message involve subtle persuasive techniques rather than direct and obvious lessons. He *shows* the audience through a combination of affect, drama, and tragic events. Only in retrospect do we encounter those moments of (tragic) possibility in which a small choice, a stubborn actor, or an insignificant intervention could have altered the trajectory. In order to arrive at such a contestable reading of Sophocles, it is instructive to analyze how minor characters in the Oedipus trilogy maneuver in contrast with the major players (particularly when these

major players are in a position of political power). Next, and related to this analysis, how does one's level of assuredness about one's position contribute to the techniques employed to persuade others of one's position? Do the more stubborn actors more effectively persuade those around them? And what effect does the experience of contingency have upon one's self-definitions as a sovereign agent?

My contention is that the drive to be a sovereign agent requires that moments of uncertainty be pushed aside in order to retain the univocal locus of power that such a seat is supposed to occupy. The sovereign—Oedipus early on, Creon later—is unable to adapt to a world replete with indecision and uncertainty. If he were to adapt, he would cease to occupy the sovereign position that he demands and others demand of him.

Meanwhile, minor characters not governed by the same requirements of potency are better equipped to deal with the aleatory. Jocasta, the sentry in *Antigone*, Haemon, and others recognize and respect the role that either chance or complex confluence plays in the outcome of events, and attempt to incorporate some flexibility into their mode of operation to manage more effectively the effects of complexity. The more calcified and dug-in the character becomes, the more violent the upheaval is when a surprising turn rears its head. As the Sophocles' trilogy moves forward, we see the dynamic interaction between various characters and the unfolding of time; the tenor of that interaction has a defining role in how they are able to respond to unexpected consequences.

I delineate three different interpretations of Sophoclean agency from the plays in order to establish three levels of tragic wisdom. When Jocasta is presented with a swerve, she attempts to 'go with the flow'; she surrenders to chance in order to avoid the

frustrating experience of things not going as anticipated. The Sentry, who must tell Creon that his decree has been violated, describes his decision-making process as a committee meeting with the selves, in which competing views are voiced until a decision eventually emerges. And Haemon, in his attempt to persuade Creon to spare Antigone's life, emphasizes an active degree of flexibility over rigidity. These wise figures' perspectives are malleable and must transform with the changing of circumstances. These three levels of agentic sensibility run counter to that of the *sovereign* agent, who makes decisions from an apparently univocal seat of power that prioritizes unswerving adherence to principles. Lastly, I want to draw attention to the way the material world plays a specific and important role in the action of the plays. Drawing on Lucretius' atomic swerve and taking seriously his material understanding of 'the way things are,' I will try to insinuate some non-human and still mediated 'agency' to the material forces and entities in Oedipus' world. Sophocles may be aware of the role of materiality, though it isn't explicitly thematized in the play. It will be up to Lucretius and me to pull his work in that direction.

“There must, I emphasize, there has to be, a swerve” (Lucretius 1968, 58)

Neither Lucretius nor Sophocles subscribes to a universe without gods, but nor do they believe in a providential supernatural influence. Instead, Lucretius uses his senses, experiences, and reasoned deductions to attempt to understand the scheme of things and their origins (Lucretius 1968, 21). He wants to explore “the seeds from which nature

creates all things, / Bids them to increase and multiply; in turn, how she [nature] resolves them to their elements / After their course is run” (Ibid.). His model is one of a world moving back and forth between equilibrium and disequilibrium; it is not beholden to a predictive model of organic growth and decay, nor does it do away with these entirely. Instead, he believes that we need new terms, models, frameworks, philosophies, and politics to appreciate the material world in all of its complexity because, as he says, “our tongue / Is poor, and this material is new” (23). Using language and systems of thought that are draped around a non-material interpretation of the world would leave us ill-equipped to address the problems that we face in a materially rich world. His starting point is simple: “Nothing at all is ever born from nothing,” and there is no supernatural creator (24).

Now, if things come from nothing, all things could
produce all kinds of things; nothing would need
Seed of its own. Men would burst out of the sea,
And fish and birds from earth, and, wild or tame,
All kinds of beasts, of dubious origin,
Inhabit deserts and the greener fields,
Nor would the same trees bear, in constancy,
The same fruit always, but, as like as not,
Oranges would appear on apple-boughs....
.....
[I]f things could come from nothing, time
Would not be of the essence for their growth.
Their ripening to full maturity.
Babies would be young men, in the blink of an eye,
And full-grown forests come leaping out of the ground.
Ridiculous!
(Lucretius 1968, 24-5)

It takes time for something to move from one form to another, and when we do experience its transformation first-hand there may be a tendency to posit the cause of this

change as supernatural (Lucretius, 24). Our experience of a changing world tempts us to understand the cause and trajectory of these changes before they take place and while they are transpiring. But, Lucretius insists, their causes are “impossible to fix” or locate specifically (24).

This, again, is not to suggest that any change can occur at any time to any thing. If this were true, it would be impossible to function in the world. Life would be a frantic series of rapid reactions to the most radically divergent sets of outcomes imaginable (and we can imagine them only because of a degree of consistency that we experience in life). There are limits, which is why, for instance, we do not see people grow tall enough to wade through the ocean (25), and why trees bear the same fruit year after year (24). But, such limits operate within limits of their own.

This is because matter is made up of a number of very simplistic and common elements. There are a finite number of types of these invisible, infinitesimal, singular bits of matter, and they must become organized in certain configurations involving a great number of them before they can impose their existence on our limited senses (Lucretius 1968, 26-9). After the life of this configuration has run its course (or sufficient force is exerted upon it to cause dissolution), it, too, is broken down into its most basic parts. Those elements are then deployed with other atoms to constitute another material assemblage, and so on. Even though Lucretius cannot observe them, he ‘deduces’ that atoms must be solid, indivisible, and indestructible. If they were not solid, then they would be composed of smaller components and space; if this were the case, then the primordia in question would actually be a combination of atoms (and could thus be

divided). By definition, then, atoms are the smallest units of matter. And, if atoms could be destroyed somehow, time would have surely have destroyed them by now. *Things* do dissolve, but this involves the reconstitution of atoms into different configurations—the primordia are preserved indefinitely. “[N]ature resolves each object to its basic atoms / But does not ever utterly destroy it. / If anything could perish absolutely, / it might be suddenly taken from our sight,... / Nature permits no visible destruction of anything” (26). In addition, Lucretius wonders where new atoms would come from if they could be destroyed at some point, and concludes that “Beyond all doubt, there must be things possessed / of an immortal essence. Nothing can / disintegrate entirely into nothing” (27). Matter changes, dissolves, varies, and is renewed, but the elements that constitute it are preserved indefinitely.

Though it is true that there a limited number of atom-types from which matter is made, an infinite number of configurations can be created from those limited types. Much of the ‘action’ takes place below our threshold of perception, at the atomic level. Lucretius, like Epicurus before him, believes in the power of things he cannot see. By witnessing their effects, he can discern their presence through his understanding of the material world, but he cannot witness them in their singularities. In a similar way, he can posit the existence of the mind (though not the location, which he places throughout the body [Lucretius 1968, 89]) by understanding the role it plays in his world. Similarly, while we don’t hold or see wind, heat, or odors (28-9), we do not doubt their existence. Lucretius is as sure of the existence of atoms as he is of wind: “Nature’s work is done by means of particles unseen” (29).

Forces, like atoms (and everything else), are material in nature. Sometimes we can see them, and sometimes we can see their effects (other times, it is impossible to distinguish between forces and their varied effects). Lucretius uses the example of drops of water wearing away a stone over time, or tiny crystals of salt wearing away a cliff. The cumulative effects of infinitesimal changes can be observed, and then those causes can be retroactively inferred. Sometimes the sum total of those tiny forces will be unanticipated, but one can sometimes construct a plausible line of causality after the fact.

As we will later see, something similar is the case for Sophocles' tragic figures. After the plot devices are in place and the action has unfolded, the characters can often see where they mis-stepped. But, prior to the events and turns coming to light, nothing convinces them that a tragic route is a possibility. This creates a drama for the audience, who have a less restricted point of view than do the characters in the play (and who can also learn from the mistakes that the characters make). Sometimes even overwhelming forces cannot be recognized; only in retrospect do we see their magnitude. And, to return to Lucretius, nature "denies us the sight we need for any given moment" (29) because snapshots are an insufficient tool for understanding trajectories and trends. Rather, Lucretius acknowledges the powerful role that forces below the level of perception play in nature, even if we can only recognize them through their effects.

Lucretius' theory requires a principle to explain the movement and flow necessary for atoms to produce what we experience in the world. This cannot be done through an appeal to something like what Newton will later posit, i.e. a principle of mathematically definable behavior of natural bodies. Atoms possess a vibrant restlessness; they are abuzz

with movement and cannot be pinpointed. As Lucretius politely contends: “If you think atoms can stop their course, refrain from movement, and by cessation cause new kinds of motion, you are far astray indeed” (Lucretius 1968, 54). His own principle of physics stems not from the moving atoms themselves, but from the gaps between them, because “there is a void in things” (30). The empty space between them *invites* their movement. They provide not only the space but also the impetus for matter to move from one location to another. Lucretius does not believe that something can come from nothing, but his theory of the material world relies upon every complex thing (as we know it) coming out of the void. If matter were “tightly packed” and had no space in which to move, everything would cease to become. Or, if the atoms remained in laminar flow and never swerved into the void beside them, no things would be formed. The voids between atoms, occupying various amounts of space and lasting for certain periods of time, are what constitute the material forces and objects that we encounter. “Matter never gives way;” it is instead invited into action by an adjacent void: “Were there no void, [atoms] would not only lack / This restlessness of motion altogether, / But more than that—they never could have been / Quickened to life from the tight-packed quiescence” (30). Neither atoms nor voids on their own would amount to *any-thing*.⁷

The configuration of atoms and voids *in combination* produces and constitutes material. It is the relationship between atoms and voids that is at the origin of things, and this relationship is the principle of all material existence. Various combinations of different types of primordia in combination with the voids between them produce the

⁷ For this point on the crucial role voids play in the Lucretian cosmos, I am indebted to and influenced by Bill Dixon.

world around us. It is the particular configuration of these types that produces the rich variety that we experience. It is the variation in the primordial constitution and configuration of things, rather than the difference in their components, that gives the world of becoming its vital potential.

The Swerve's Relation to the Void

As Lucretius understands it, atoms rain straight down in a laminar flow, exactly parallel to each other, through the void. Suddenly, for no discernible reason or cause, an atom's path takes an "infinitesimal deviation" (59) from its course and eventually collides with a neighbor. There is no logarithm that can predict the initial collision or the ensuing elemental pile-up (even if we could observe all of the variables). The one thing that we can be sure of is that without this tiny swerve—this *clinamen*—nothing would be created; there would be no "birth-shock" (58). There is always the potential for something to emerge from the slightest change of direction from one atom. Nothing is guaranteed to occur from this encounter, but the possibility remains because all is in constant motion. The relationship between atoms and voids eludes the models of efficient causality and providential guidance. There is only matter—that singular, atomic, solid, immutable, permanent element of things—and the voids that exist between these atoms. Together, the combination produces the material things that we see and sense (as well as many that remain below the level of human perception). The distinction between matter and void is absolute: "each one must, in its essence be itself completely. / Where [void]

exists...matter cannot be found; what substance holds void cannot occupy” (34-5). This also leads to the conclusion that nothing can hold a void absolutely, because it would have to be solid in order to do so, which would mean that there would be no void involved. Only atoms are solid in this sense, and this is because they do not contain any voids.

The constitution of everything that we encounter is some combination of atoms and voids, but those combinations vary greatly. For instance, solid objects that are hard and weighty are formed by atoms that are more closely packed together than in items that are softer or lighter. The atoms in gas and water may be similar atom types to the ones found in metal,⁸ but their proximity to one another is entirely different. “Moreover, if nature had not set a limit / to fragmentation, by this time all matter / would have been so reduced by time’s attrition” (36). Things can only dissolve into their primordial and basic units, which can then be integrated into some other configuration to constitute something else. Lucretius again addresses the issue of the infinite number of atoms by arguing that this is the only way to account for the richness of the cosmos. After determining that there cannot be an edge to the cosmos without there being an outside to it, Lucretius reasons:

Now let’s work out whether there’s any limit
To their sum total; study, likewise, void,
Space, emptiness, area where all things move.
Does this have finite limits or does it reach
unmeasurable in deep wide boundlessness?
The universe is limitless, unbounded
In any of its areas; otherwise
It would have to have an end somewhere, but no—

⁸ “The same atoms constitute ocean, sky, lands, rivers, sun, crops, bushes, animals; these atoms mingle and move in different ways and combination” (43).

Nothing, it seems, can possibly have an end
Without there being something out beyond it. (47)

The picture that emerges is one of an infinite number of atoms, raining down with tiny voids between them, until one collision results in another, and so on. This is the creative and active process that is constantly occurring *ad infinitum*. Where do the atoms collect if they do not end up becoming part of a configuration of atoms? They do not collect anywhere, according to Lucretius, because such a claim would presuppose a bottom and a limit to the arena in which they are falling, as well as a point in time when atoms would be stationary rather than in motion (at the bottom of some pit). Both of these assumptions violate his reasoning. Instead, “as it is, no rest is ever given to the atoms’ rainfall; there’s no pit, far down, to be their pool, their ultimate resting place. All things keep on, in everlasting motion, out of the infinite come the particles speeding above, below, in endless dance” (48). Lucretius notes also that if there were a floor toward which all atoms fell, they would already have collected there, and there would be no space for their endless vibratory movement (48). There is no limit to the number of combinations atoms can produce or the space in which they will be produced. This is in part because void cannot be limited by matter, and matter cannot be limited by void—the sum of their combination is limitless (48). There is also no discernible pattern in the way configurations have come to be:

Surely the atoms never began by forming
a conscious pact, a treaty with each other,
where they should stay apart, where come together.
More likely, being so many, in many ways
Harassed and driven through the universe

from an infinity of time, by trying
all kinds of motion, every combination
.....
Now this could not be done
if there were not an infinite supply
of matter, whence lost things could be restored (49)

It is not entirely clear whether it is the void or the atom that is responsible for the swerve and its ensuing collision—sometimes Lucretius speaks in terms of atoms “driving” and at others he says that they are “driven” (54). It is more likely that it is the combination of the two that produces a set of conditions conducive to the swerve. The relationship between void and matter constitutes materiality; the absence of either would preclude it.

The Lucretian insistence on unpredictable outcomes and the impossibility of determining the cause of a collision in advance lend themselves to a Sophoclean vision of tragedy, albeit from a different point of entry and on a different scale. Characters, like atoms, cannot be pinned down to a static location, and they participate at the macro-level in the vibrant restlessness of the world. Even Creon or Oedipus as sovereign cannot prevent the unpredictable course of events. The best that we, like them, can do is remain flexible in the face of dynamic complexity, become more sensitive to the emergence of new configurations, and develop the courage to intervene experimentally in a vast world of becoming that is far deeper than human interaction. The instances where these sensibilities are absent are good places to see what we can draw from Sophocles regarding the tragic swerve.

Sophocles juxtaposes the stubbornness of characters who seek sovereign agency with the flexibility of those who recognize the complexity of a world of becoming.⁹ In the end, despite their massive efforts, it is the stubborn who suffer the most horrific outcomes. Throughout the trilogy, we can see Oedipus move from one camp to the other, destroyed by a world that he sought to control until finally recognizing both the way the fates can turn at an instant and how small interactions can shift the trajectory of a series of events in significant ways.

The title of the first play, *Oedipus the King* (*Oedipus Rex*), characterizes Oedipus as the embodiment of state power. The play opens with Oedipus overseeing a city that is suffering from a plague. It is understood that the cause of the plague has something to do with human agency; the city is paying for some type of pollution or defilement of the cosmic order. Oedipus is responsible for uncovering what this pollution is and reversing it, redeeming Thebes in the eyes of the gods. His ascension to power is credited to his ousting of the Sphinx, who had been strangling the citizens one by one, from a rock outside of Thebes. It appeared that Oedipus had rescued the city from the chaos it had been enduring since its king, Laius, had gone missing on a journey. As a result, Oedipus is appointed king, and the queen, Jocasta, becomes Oedipus' wife. He rules the city for several years before the curse reappears, calling into question whether in fact all is well in the cosmos. Oedipus is committed to discovering the cause of the plague and remedying it; he is "resolute" and "will not stop" until the curse is lifted (Sophocles 1996, 11).

⁹ I am not saying, recall, that Sophocles himself entertains a Lucretian universe in advance, only that some of the characters he introduces and the rapid turns he dramatizes *can* be read through such a lens.

Upon Creon's request, the soothsayer Tiresias travels to Thebes and approaches Oedipus, claiming to know why the city is cursed. Oedipus reacts aggressively to this news, berating Tiresias until he reluctantly explains to a shocked crowd that it is Oedipus' pollution that has caused the plague; Oedipus is the locus of this unfortunate act. Tiresias is referring to a foretold course of events of which Oedipus is aware and had taken every precaution to avoid. Oedipus learned as a child that he was fated to murder his father, bed his mother, and incur the wrath of the gods. In order to avoid this curse, Oedipus ran far from home and found his way to Thebes, miles and miles from his mother and father. After hearing Tiresias' accusation, Oedipus becomes momentarily shaken.

Partly to shore up his certainty that the claims are not true, he redoubles his investigative efforts to find the truth. He lashes out at Jocasta's brother, Creon, who had called for Tiresias. Creon takes offense, warning Oedipus: "If you really think a stubborn mind is something to be proud of, you're not thinking straight" (30).¹⁰ Oedipus' mind *had* become clouded by the soothsayer's claim. When Creon argues that Oedipus "makes no sense," Oedipus quickly fires back "I make *decisions*" (35). Sophocles is demonstrating that this is what Oedipus believes the sovereign's primary task to be: *to make decisions*. The priority is not getting everyone's input or even making the right choice, but rather *making a decision* from the seat of power. There is no room for flexibility or grey area. Jocasta, the sister of one interlocutor and the wife/mother of the other, attempts to calm them both. A few moments later, it becomes more apparent that Oedipus may have

¹⁰ Straight, as opposed to swerving. While perhaps unintentional, the language throughout the play thematizes the juxtaposition of straight vs. swerve, unswerving vs. flexibility.

unintentionally killed Laius the King in a road rage encounter. This possibility catches him by surprise, but rather than acknowledge that Tiresias might be correct about it all, he digs his denial even deeper on the incest question. He insists that it is impossible that Jocasta is his mother and that he has accidentally, unknowingly married her (although this is becoming clearer to the audience). It is here that Jocasta, I contend, expresses the version of Sophoclean sensibility inflected by Lucretius. She argues:

How can a man have scruples
When it's only Chance that's king?
There's nothing certain, nothing preordained.
We should live as carefree as we may.
Forget this silly thought of mother-marrying.
Why, many men in dreams have married mothers,
And he lives happiest who makes the least of it. (52)

The edifice begins to crack. Jocasta soon senses that Tiresias' story is more plausible than it first seemed, although the logistics and details have yet to surface. She starts to recognize the scope of the consequences of the story coming to light, should it turn out to be true. In response, Jocasta attempts to 'go with the flow' rather than deny or justify. This is the first version of Sophoclean agency that I want to note: Jocasta expresses an ability to accept an unexpected course of events by "making the least of it." Her approach is in sharp contrast to that of Oedipus, who focuses on reasoning his way toward a masterful decision. Oedipus, who had spent his life avoiding a curse too horrible to come true, now slowly discovers that it could have potentially played out without him knowing it—a truth even more horrible than the curse. He persists, and now proceeds to uncover the ways in which he had inadvertently enacted the curse *through his very attempt to avoid it*. Laius, who was Oedipus' father, learned of the curse that his infant son was said

to have. In order to preclude it from coming to pass, he asked a nurse to take his son far away and kill him. But the child was rescued by a man who, in order to preclude the realization of the prophecy, sent him to a faraway land, where a family adopted him. After learning of the curse, Oedipus ran away from those he considered his biological parents—back to his actual homeland. On his way to Thebes, his chance encounter with a stranger at the meeting of several roads led to an altercation, which resulted in the murder of the man who turned out to be his biological father, Laius the King, thus plunging Thebes into chaos at the hands of the Sphinx. After answering the Sphinx's riddle, he marries the queen (who is of course his mother) and has two children/siblings with her. His actions did not yield predictable results, and he was unable to control the outcome of events despite his position of power and his massive efforts to subvert his fate. As Creon notes at the end of the play, after Jocasta has hung herself and Oedipus has gouged out his eyes: "Stop this striving to be master of all. The master you had in life has been your fall" (80). Creon is perhaps implying that the attempt at mastery of the world was not only unproductive for Oedipus, but led to his utter misery. By the end of the trilogy, this will be a lesson that Creon will have to relearn.

Oedipus, however, cannot forget the lessons learned during the first segment of the trilogy. He is physically marked by the violence done to himself, and is crippled by his self-inflicted blindness. As a result, he is dependent on his daughters (Antigone at first, but then both sisters) for everything. He opens *Oedipus at Colonus* twenty years after blinding himself, and he tells his daughter that he now asks for little and makes do with less: "Patience is what I've learned from my pain; from pain and time and my own

past royalty” (87). Oedipus notes the reversal of gender roles as a result of the kinship transgressions that form his family. His daughters are traveling and bearing the familial burden of taking care of the father, while his sons stay at home and “keep the house” (106). Oedipus no longer occupies the role of the sovereign with decision-making power. Rather, he is shamed, blinded, and exiled. His new perspective is now one of patience and flexibility rather than sovereignty and relentless truth finding. His vulnerability to the (material) world dramatically shifts his perspective and intensifies his sensitivity to others and to the world around him. His approach to life bears little resemblance to the Oedipus we meet in *Oedipus Rex*. A few lines later, he observes “It’s always wise to be informed before we act” (93), a lesson hard-learned in *Oedipus the King*, when the priority was placed heavily on *acting*. And here being “informed” no longer means having instrumentalizable information. Rather it is to be *in-formed* by the possibility of forces beyond one’s power to master.

When Theseus arrives several scenes later, Oedipus informs him that an oracle has foretold his—Oedipus’—death on a field of battle between Thebes and Athens, despite the fact that they are not at war. It is Oedipus’ final wish to get revenge on his sons for banishing him from his home and forsaking their bloodline. When a confused Theseus asks how he could possibly die on a battlefield between two cities that are not at war, Oedipus explains:

Good son of Aeguesu, gentle son,
Only to the gods is given not to age or die
All else disrupts through all disposing time.
Earth ebbs in strength, the body ebbs in power.
Faith dies and faithlessness is born.
No constant friendship breathes

Between man and man, or city and a city.
Soon or late, the sweet will sour,
The sour will sweet to love again.
(124, emphasis mine)

The nature of politics, relationships, the body, materiality, and life is one of becoming rather than stasis. This is a sentiment, I argue, that Lucretius would support. The model of vitality found in the buzzing of atoms surrounded by voids is not compatible with a world of eternal and unchanging things. “Soon or late,” swerves will lead to changes in course, and the results of these swerves cannot be anticipated. Oedipus of all people has learned the ever-present influence of change over time, and is especially aware of the unexpected consequences that it can have on the best-laid plans. His position and political influence have taken a drastic swerve, and this swerve has taught him a valuable lesson about the foolishness of presupposing that things will proceed as expected. When Creon arrives with his soldiers, intent upon taking Oedipus back home to Thebes (and eventually settling on kidnapping his two daughters), Oedipus gives Creon the same message that Creon had given him in *Oedipus Rex*. He explains that Creon will not succeed by being a bully or using sheer force to manipulate the course of events. That strategy failed Oedipus: he was unable to escape the reach of the curse, despite his insistence on its impossibility. Creon, the one who now occupies the role of the sovereign, acts on “strength alone” (139). And Oedipus notes that while his fate could not have been prevented in the first story (because it had already occurred), Creon still has time to choose an action style with better chances of success. In the end, the curse of Oedipus deals its final blow to the city that banished him and then demanded him back: his death leaves a power vacuum that pits his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, against each other

to contend for the throne. They end up killing each other in battle, again leaving Creon the sovereign seat. This sets up the final installment of the trilogy.

Creon, still drunk with sovereign power and now facing contenders for it, announces that the gods have graciously “steadied the ship of state, which storms have terribly tossed” (198). These unexpected “storms” present Creon with an opportunity; he faces a fork in his road. The storms may allow him to recognize that politics is complex and tumultuous and thus ill suited to his new, sovereign approach to political authority and decision-making. Or, that complexity may lead him away from the experiential transformation toward flexibility, compelling him to dig his heels in deeper. Choosing this latter path means firming up an iron-fisted approach to politics and redoubling his efforts to bend the world to his will.

It appears clear to the audience, perhaps, that this aspirational mastery over the world has been nothing but trouble for the leaders of Thebes, but perhaps Creon would put too much of himself at risk by attempting such a transfiguration. Creon’s most intensive commitment is to a world characterized by certainty and predictability. Virtue for him involves a strong sense of loyalty, unfaltering duty, and honor. Put differently, he values things that do not *swerve*. Outwardly, he says that someone else may know better than him, acknowledging that he is “the kind of man who can’t and never could abide the tongue-tied ruler who through fear backs away from sound advice” (198). But it soon becomes clear that he reverts to the familiar strategy of aggressive sovereignty; he cannot make the transition that Oedipus made between the first and second play and still fulfill his role as sovereign.

That is to say, the sovereign seat of power resists acknowledging a world of unexpected becoming; it insists on strict principles and a predictable world, whether that world matches human experience or not. Indecision and real uncertainty are thought to be anathema to governance. It is more important for the sovereign to make decisions than to be correct. For instance, his first act of state after the war is to insist that no one shall give Polyneices his burial rights: he is to decompose in plain sight, disgraced by carrion and vermin for the trouble that he caused Thebes (199).

In the next scene, Sophocles presents what I am calling a second model of agency, distinct from but related to Jocasta's 'go with the flow' sensibility. One of the sentries tasked with guarding the bodies on the field approaches. He is "distraught" as he comes "bumbling in towards the King" (200). He is afraid of the king and the power of the sovereign, and has bad news to share. We find out shortly that he has discovered that the bodies have been covered with soil and given some kind of burial rites. This trembling sentry drew the short straw and is forced to bear the bad news to Creon. He describes the (in)decision-making process as holding "committees with [him]self," and he acts out a dialogue between internal committee members as they debate whether or not to tell Creon. Multiple voices within the body are in contention as the decision that emerges is 'made.'¹¹ The sentry is not in a position of authority over these voices as they argue. He is involved with a committee meeting of inner selves, from which a decision derives, but he does not 'make' that decision in the same way that Oedipus 'made' decisions in *Oedipus Rex*, or the way Creon does in the *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

¹¹ This description of the sentry's agency is theorized in A. W. H. Adkins' *From the Many to the One* (Adkins 1970).

Room for deliberation is squeezed out in the sovereign's world of agency.

Sophocles again gestures toward an alternative mode of agency when he presents the minor characters in his tragedies. The burial of Polyneices is an unexpected swerve in the world, and the Sentry's debate with his own committee of selves represents the struggle to negotiate agency in a complex world of unanticipated events. This is what I refer to as the second vision of alternate agency in the Sophoclean trilogy. If decision-making were to be understood as a committee meeting of inner selves, what type of political sensibility would become emphasized? It seems that a more careful mulling over of options would be in order; the strong-arming, strength, bullying option would appear less compelling.

Creon reacts predictably to this news: he is furious at the messenger and he accuses the guards of taking a bribe to cover for this culprit. The sentry insists that Creon should be upset with whoever buried the body rather than the guards who did not catch them, but Creon is deaf with anger: "Oh, what a crying shame, when right reason reasons wrong," the Sentry remarks. Creon responds by threatening his life and storming back into the palace (204).

In the next scene, Creon warns Antigone of the danger involved in maintaining her unyielding and stubborn comportment in a stanza full of material figures of speech: "The toughest will is first to break: like hard untempered steel which snaps and shivers at a touch when hot from off the forge" (211). Haemon, in an effort to save Antigone's life, makes a sustained and multi-pronged appeal to Creon. Of all of the Sophoclean characters in these three plays, Haemon is perhaps the one who most clearly embodies a sensibility of tragic wisdom. His attempt to persuade the sovereign to reverse his

decision, although unsuccessful, represents a third version of alternative agency in the plays. In addition to the flexibility of ‘going with the flow’ (Jocasta’s) and a negotiation of decision-making via an inner committee of the self (the Sentry’s), Haemon recognizes the inadequacy of a purely logical or intellectual argument against Creon, who is unresponsive to such efforts, despite his claims to the contrary. Instead, Haemon plays on several persuasive techniques to appeal to the affective dimension of argument. These flow between rational argument and sentimental attachment. This approach demonstrates what it means to intervene in a complex world that eludes human mastery, even if we cannot guarantee the efficacy of intervention in advance. Unlike Creon, Haemon favors small, indirect, and subtle actions in order to achieve his ends. Rather than throwing our hands up in despair at the complexity of life, the characters of Sophocles give us a way to proceed in spite of not being in complete control over actions or their effects. A close reading of the dialogue in *Antigone* shows a nuanced Sophoclean perspective on the world of becoming and on developing rhetorical strategies to deal with those who insist on treating the world in more static terms.

Haemon begins with an appeal to his paternal line, claiming that no relationship with a woman/wife could contend with the “good of [Creon's] abiding counsel” (220). Creon responds approvingly, commenting on how wise he is to take this position, and why Creon needs absolute loyalty in his house. He is alluding to Antigone’s transgression, but he also includes Haemon in the threat to his family members:

How can I, if I nurse sedition in my house,
not foster it outside?
No. If a man can keep his home in hand,
he proves his competence to keep the state.

But one who breaks the law and flouts authority,
I never will allow.
Unswerving submission
to whomsoever the state has put in charge
is what is asked: in little things as well as great,
in right and wrong.¹²
And I am confident that one who thus obeys,
will make a perfect subject or a perfect king:
the kind of man who is in the thick of flying spears
never flinches from his post but stands dauntless at his comrade's side.
But as for anarchy,
there is no greater curse than anarchy...
let us then defend authority. (221, emphasis mine)

Let us analyze this passage through a Lucretian lens. Creon believes that unswerving obedience to the sovereign state, whether right or wrong, is what keeps anarchy at bay. And this is the goal of the sovereign. The ethos expressed in the language of this passage—spears in laminar flow while the obedient subject stands immobile in their midst—is *anti-Lucretian*. A Lucretian reading might suggest that it is unlikely that the spears will consistently fly in parallel and hit their target; it is more likely that once in a while one will swerve, causing unintended consequences. Creon contends that a well-ordered society requires straight, unswerving loyalty. A competent, decisive leader who demands obedience from his subjects can eliminate unexpected misfortune. His goal is to avoid, control, or ignore the unpredictable, which he perceives as the greatest threat. The unpredictable *must* be eschewed in order to avoid a disintegration of the order that props up the sovereign's authority. Creon fears that if the seat of sovereign power acknowledged anything but a predictable world of order, obedient citizens, and

¹² Professor Richard Bett of Johns Hopkins University has translated these lines as: "He whom the city appoints, it is necessary to listen to this person / Both in small matters and just matters and the opposite." While this literal translation lacks the term "unswerving," the principle is the same: one should not deviate from one's obedience to the city's king.

unquestioned authority (much less a more complex world of tragic becoming), the city would be toppled, homes crumbled, and allied ranks shattered (221). He is not afraid of plagues, wars, coups, natural disasters, or slave revolts. He is afraid of anarchy—the breakdown of authority predicated upon unquestioning obedience. Put differently, Creon is intent upon avoiding the swerve.

Let us return to Sophocles' text to see how Haemon responds to Creon's latest, even more aggressive position; he needs to make inroads in his argument without provoking Creon's infamous temper. This is not an easy task, though he has made some headway by developing a rapport with Creon. The rapport has developed because Haemon appeared to be sympathetic to Creon's position. He proceeds by suggesting that two reasonable people can come to two different conclusions with regard to the same scenario. This is a position that Creon claims to support, too, but has difficulty acknowledging in practice. His aversion to this idea has to be handled carefully, if Haemon wants to pursue his line of argument. Haemon cautiously tells Creon that he believes the public (the "simple citizen") may have come to a different conclusion regarding Antigone's crime and its appropriate punishment. The commoners, he suggests, may well sympathize with Antigone's position. After all, her intent was to ensure that her slain brother would not be left to the carrion birds and dogs (222), and she does not deserve to be sentenced to death for this "crime." In between each claim, Haemon firms up his allegiance to his father, reminding him of how much he prizes his well-being, wisdom, and family name. In so doing, he stages an indirect and nuanced argument to erode Creon's resolve from the inside, rather than from a position built exclusively by

reason, power, or data. In another materially charged metaphor, Haemon makes his most salient claim about his father's sovereign stubbornness.

So I beg you Father,
don't entrench yourself in your opinion
as if everyone else was wrong.
The kind of man who always thinks that he is right,
that his opinions, his pronouncements
are the final word—
is usually exposed as hollow as they come.
But a wise man is flexible, has much to learn
without a loss of dignity.
See the trees in floodtime, how they bend
along the torrent's course,
and how their twigs and branches do not snap,
but stubborn trees are torn up roots and all.
In sailing too, when fresh weather blows,
a skipper who will not slacken sail, turns turtle,
finishes his voyage beam-ends up. (222)

Sophocles suggests here, I think, a different mode of proceeding than the one to which Creon is accustomed. This path would require a reorientation of his persona and position; he would have to sublimate his need to make sovereign decisions and prioritize flexibility in governance. Such a shift would be as much a change in governing practice as a shift in sensibility. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult. Simple 'reason' is often insufficient to prompt someone to reorient her or his pre- or sub-intellectual sensibilities. Multiple prongs focusing on several different layers of thought, affect, and timing are required for the best chance at succeeding. Still, there are no guarantees. But Haemon is finally insinuating his point. The wisest man/leader/agent is the one who remains flexible, has much to learn, and bends rather than snap when the water rises. When the wind picks up, the wise leader 'slackens' the sail in order to avoid being overcome by elements outside

of his/her control. The wise man is the one who does not “entrench” himself in his own opinion, does not believe that everyone else is wrong, and does not perceive a loss of dignity in a change of position mid-course. Such an approach to politics—given its complexity and tendency toward dynamic change at unexpected times—might be a more effective strategy for governing than the decision-driven sovereign outlook demonstrated by the young Oedipus and Creon. Sophocles himself suggests this point, I think, but he does not do so in a reductive or straightforward way. This point must be insinuated to us so that we will come to see it ourselves, rather than having it hammered into us. So Sophocles allows the action to unfold before our eyes and ears. Ultimately, Creon fails to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish, just as Oedipus failed when he took up the subject-position of the sovereign.

It is less a matter of being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ than of being effective or ineffective. As the audience sees each tragedy unfold, certain characters lose credibility through actions, while others are redeemed despite things not going their way. This contrast can be coarsely mapped onto how flexible each character is in the face of changing circumstances. Sophocles may be nudging us toward a less rigid and calcified mode of action, appealing to several different levels of persuasion in order to do so. Once excavated, such a form of politics is one that I want to expand upon. What does it mean to favor such Sophoclean sensibility over a more sovereign-dependent one? What would appear differently to us, and would different avenues become available while others are foreclosed? How would things look if we had a more mediated sense of agency, in which the subject was not the master of her self, her decisions, or the world around her?

Whether we are examining atoms, characters, or their respective collisions, it seems important to: (1.) take the complexity of their interactions seriously; (2.) watch and listen more carefully than we normally do; (3.) be patient as things unfold—tracing trends can be a tricky business and knee-jerk reactions can often result in disaster; (4.) accept and then adapt to sets of circumstances that surprise us, acknowledging that despite our efforts to determine the course of action, we are but a small portion of the world that influences how interactions will turn out; (5.) deeply and responsibly question what we ‘know’ to be certain on a regular basis, while not losing completely our ethical sense of direction. This last step is particularly challenging without being steeped in the other four aspirations, as there is almost no need for self-reflection if there is no advantage found in the more modest approach encouraged by the first four challenges.

Lucretius teaches us that the appearance of stability can hide a reality of atoms that are in constant vibratory motion, and that while certain arrangements often recreate similar arrangements down the line (cows give birth to other cows, for instance), this is not by necessity and not for eternity. Things also have a tendency to swerve, if only to an infinitesimal degree and for no particular or discernible reason. We are reminded that the world is a complex place when atomic collisions—or several different series of collisions—result in something unexpected. Retroactively, we may be able to retrace the steps and resuscitate some type of linear causality, but this is less useful for predicting the way atomic configurations will behave when in proximity to each other. I have suggested that like Lucretius, Sophocles calls into question our default beliefs, which rely on unconscious or unseen elements, while urging us to remain flexible during those times

when it seems most appropriate to stick to our guns. Only by modestly acknowledging that we may be wrong on our diagnosis of events or our prognosis for moving forward can we make more effective political interventions in a world periodically marked by rapid turns. *The swerve is both an impediment to action—it throws a wrench into the workings of our plans—and a spur to action—it can impel us to respond to a rapid turn of events.* Wisdom gleaned from Sophocles and Lucretius together thematizes the role of the swerve in a complex world; it may also ask us to consider our theories of action given this swerve.

The immense complexity that we experience in life can tempt us to give up on a theory of action. If the swerve can foil a proposed way forward when we least expect it, and if sovereign agency is exposed as over-ambitious and dangerous, it might seem as though there is no hope for figuring out how to act. But this would be to miss the most important themes highlighted in Lucretius' and Sophocles' work: a world of complexity and unexpected outcomes requires us to consider our orientation toward action much more carefully rather than not at all. If agency involved sovereign individuals making clear decisions about a stable world from a unified position, choosing what to do next would be a relatively simple question. Making that question more complex by coming to terms with swerves and turns does not mean that we sacrifice all our ability to intervene in a course of action. Rather, it means that we can more effectively intervene from a more modest position, being exploratory when an aleatory experience reminds us again that we are only partially responsible for the way things turn out. It also insulates us from the intensely negative experiences of *ressentiment*—if we are only a part of the configuration

that results in an event turning out the way it does, and if those events develop in part due to the degree of variability that the swerve injects, we can focus on how to stage our next intervention rather than dwelling on the fact that we are not sovereign agents who enjoy mastery over the world. Such a reading makes certain theories of action seem clumsy and ineffectual, while presenting us with a host of others that may have seemed too minor, subtle, or indirect to be truly effective in a world without swerves.

Material Ethics and Tragic Wisdom

Lucretius' description of 'the way things are' has an explicitly normative goal: if the world flows, then a certain set of ethics is most appropriate to it. Furthermore, resistance to or dismissal of this material world of flow is not only futile and false, it is also ineffective and thus unethical. Ethics involves a method of comporting oneself in a way that is amenable to the nature of the world of which we are a part. Orienting oneself in a way that conflicts with the flow of the world is thus unethical for Lucretius. It results in distress and discomfort, akin to spending a lifetime trying to stay still in the midst of a current. "Your nature snarls, yaps, barks for nothing, really, except that pain be absent from the body and mind enjoy delight, with fear dispelled, anxiety gone. We do not need much for bodily comfort, only loss of pain" (Lucretius 1968, 52). Doing ethical work, then, involves more than having knowledge of how things work. It involves participating in a world filled with material swerves in such a way that emphasizes exploration, flexibility and sometimes minor, indirect interventions in the flow. Finding a style of

comportment appropriate to the world that is both patterned and yet not wholly predictable is not quick or easy. It is, as Lucretius says, like the gentlest rain that wears away the hardest stone (29). It involves cultivating both the passionate and the wild in the body. Ethical practice is, like everything else, material, and so it requires close attention to the specific tendencies and resistances of the materials in play. For instance, approaching Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy with materiality in mind emphasizes a set of themes otherwise ignored by other interpretive frames: the materiality of the road crossing where Oedipus killed Laius; the offending bit of earth that covers the corpse of Polyneices that ignites Creon's temper; the sacred nature of "The Brazen Threshold," the boulder where Oedipus and Antigone decide to stop at Colonus; Oedipus' increased vulnerability and sensitivity to the material world after he loses his sense of sight (as well as Tiresias' ability to soothsay, perhaps as a result of his blindness); the necessity of the specific spot in which Oedipus dies at Colonus; and Sophocles' materialist metaphors that remind the reader of these physical locales, forces, and things. Sophocles is attentive to the material world and the significant role that it plays in the action of the trilogy, as well as its reluctance to bend to the will of those who intend to master it.

Lucretius simultaneously advocates a way of seeing *and* a way of becoming. By carefully listening to the material flow of the world, an aspiring agent can avoid a vigorous and futile struggle against the flow while helping to divert it. Seeking a rhythm congruent with the flow is not only more effective for those pursuing their ends, but also a *better* way to live life. The goal is to pair the vital force of the agent with the vital flow of the world in which she finds herself. This is not a mode of ethical or political quietism,

in which events are fully determined by material surroundings. Rather, as we see in Sophocles, the swerve of events also offers occasions for human intervention, though these interventions must be carefully considered and timed in order to nudge the course of action one way or another. Creon's tactic is to strong-arm and coerce: to try to reverse the flow with strength. This strategy is met with tragic consequences. A different approach might involve a more mediated and distributed notion of agency, a more nuanced approach to intervening in a complex material world, and a less direct manner of performing as an agent.

The key model of agency derived from Lucretius and Sophocles is one of complex flexibility. Jocasta's approach is one of passive flexibility. She acknowledges chance and avoids, up to a point, frustration when things evolve unexpectedly. Her focus is on accepting those events that she cannot control. When the Sentry is confronted with a swerve in the action, he holds a committee meeting with himself to figure out what the best option is. Options are weighed by a variety of different "parties" within the self until a decision emerges, after having assessed more than one alternative. And Haemon devises and pursues a nuanced strategy of rhetorical persuasion, in which his position first appears congruent with his interlocutor, but slowly develops into its refutation, unwinding it without raising the ire of his adversary. His appeals to the values of flexibility and exploration in making decisions arrive at several levels of argument—his position remains supple and dynamic as he learns which tactics are more or less persuasive. And, a general Lucretian theme throughout Sophocles' work reveals how flexibility may be utilized in a world where the materiality of places, forces, senses, and

plagues all play a significant role in how events transpire. Careful attention to these material influences combined with the ability to respond creatively to them when they do not conform to anticipations engenders the most effective agent. In the next chapter, I will use the theme of flexibility as a basis for a richer vision of agency involving *plasticity*. Plasticity involves both the ability of the agent to flexibly take form, but also to project form without resorting to a notion of sovereign agency. By using the brain as an example of plasticity, I will call into question the adequacy of a center-based mechanical model for both the brain and the material world. Instead, I'll focus on a self-organizing, versatile network that is constantly being remade through a combination of habit and novelty. Flexibility will serve as a necessary but insufficient basis for plasticity.

Chapter 2

The Subject of Neuroplasticity: Virtuality in the Neural Network

Foucault's well-known critique of the sovereign subject goes beyond exposing that model of the subject as a product of a liberal mode of politics. His analysis of power as exercised rather than owned, dispersed rather than centered, explains why power over the subject is not (merely) repressive.¹³ It is also productive. The subject is restrained and enabled by the exercise of power; she is *constituted* in and by power relations. The subject positions that she takes up vis-à-vis other subjects is key to the way she understands herself in relation to other nodes in the network. If we are persuaded by Foucault's understanding of power, we must also revise our understanding of the subject. It can no longer be encapsulated by a sovereign individual 'possessing' power or the State apparatus 'having' a monopoly of power over its subjects. Rather, lower levels of interaction must also be areas of political struggle and study. Through Foucault's analysis, politics is expanded beyond the relation between the empowered state over its political subjects, whom it protects.

This analysis is useful not only because it is persuasive, but because it reveals the way our notions of subjectivity, power, history, and politics are mutually constitutive. Modifying our take on one reconfigures the others. In *What Should We Do With Our*

¹³ This line of thinking can be found throughout Foucault's work, but is perhaps most clearly laid out in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Judith Butler expands on this work in a number of places, including *Gender Trouble*.

Brain? (2008), Catherine Malabou undertakes a comparable analysis. She, too, challenges and reworks subjectivity, but she does so by reexamining our understanding of the brain. Her challenge to the unified sovereign subject stems from her integration of what she considers to be a consensus among the neuroscientific community about the *malleability* of neural processes. Unlike previous models of the brain, in which it was characterized by “rigidity, the fixity, the anonymity of the control center,” Malabou points toward a “certain margin of improvisation, of creation, of the aleatory” in the brain (35). She suggests “not just that the brain has a history...but that it *is* a history” (1). Rather than understanding the brain as a deterministic organ with a fixed set of capabilities (as some organs may be described), Malabou contends that ‘we’ are constantly constructing and developing our brain, though few of us realize it. “We are its subject—authors and products at once—and we do not know it” (1).

Subjects, on this analysis, are caught in the middle. We are not in control of the way the brain develops, but brains do not develop entirely as a result of blind causes outside of our control. And, they are not the product of a teleological process that can be known in advance. Instead, our ‘agency’ vis-à-vis neural processes consists in discovering a space for development that can be maximized through self-work. ‘We’ can work on ‘ourselves’—our brains. Our brains are not simply on their way to becoming something determined by our genes or a genetic plan. Instead, there is a degree of variability from one brain to another and from one day to the next, and this variability derives from our experience of the world. As our brain develops over time and through experience, each brain is individuated from others as a result of those distinctive

experiences. A neuroplastic brain takes on new forms and intensifies particular neural connections as we engage in the world around us on a day to day basis. Malabou argues that the brain enjoys a degree of flexibility, but that the term flexibility does not capture the bidirectional nature of the variability that neuroscientists are proposing. Following many in the neuroscientific community, Malabou instead favors the term “plasticity,” which she explains is “the dominant concept of the neurosciences... Today it constitutes their common point of interest, their dominant motif, and their privileged operating model” (4).

The distinction between flexibility and plasticity is particularly important for this study because it supports the argument made in the first chapter that flexibility is a necessary but insufficient characteristic of effective agency in a complex world of swerves. Based on my reading in the first chapter, Sophocles appears to prefer flexibility to rigid stubbornness, but this flexibility alone is not enough to avoid the tragic consequences that mark each of the Oedipus plays. Plasticity incorporates flexibility into another crucial component. Rather than merely the “capacity to *receive form*,” it also denotes “the capacity to *give form*” (5). The brain has the ability to flexibly adapt to the changes it experiences, but it also demonstrates an ability to be ‘formative.’ To borrow from the reading of Sophocles in the first chapter, Jocasta’s tendency to ‘go with the flow’ may be paired with “the resource to give form, the power to create, to invent or even to erase an impression, the power to style. Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius” (12).

Despite the fact that there is widespread agreement regarding the plasticity of the brain, Malabou writes that we do not realize the role that we occupy in relation to our brain. “We are completely ignorant of this dynamic, this organization, and this structure. We continue to believe in the ‘rigidity of an entirely genetically determined brain’” (4). Accordingly, our approach to the brain is based upon a set of assumptions that do not hold. For this reason and despite the developments in neuroscience over the past four decades, “neuronal man has no consciousness”; “we are still foreign to ourselves” (2). Even though our brains are undoubtedly developing in a unique relation to experience, our ignorance of this fact precludes us from taking a more active role in that development. Illuminating plasticity’s operation will not only give us a better understanding of how our brains work, but will also “disengage [the brain] from a certain number of ideological presuppositions that implicitly govern the entire neuroscientific field and, by a mirror effect, the entire field of politics—and in this way [will] rescue philosophy from its irresponsible torpor” (11).

The argument in this chapter is that plasticity is a productive idea to fold into a theory of agency because it accounts for a constituted subject that changes over time (sometimes due to a Lucretian swerve, sometimes because of a predictable set of events) but resists falling back on either a pre-determined subject that plays no role in those changes or a sovereign subject who is master of herself and her world. If plasticity is a condition that exists between determinism and sovereignty, using it to describe agency can clear the terrain for new approaches to political intervention while reinterpreting a host of sticky questions about the nature of the subject as it relates to politics and/or

political theory. The political theory canon features several conceptions of the political that rest on assumptions that are incongruous with a notion of neuroplasticity. For instance, what type of challenge would plasticity pose to rational choice theory, in which each subject possesses a stable set of self-interested preferences grounded in rationality? Or how might we revise our understanding of democracy if it no longer relied on a relatively static citizenry or an ability to re-present the views of a constituency to other representatives? Could we still argue that the best political options available will emerge in an ideal speech situation described by Habermas? How would issues of personal responsibility be modified if we took seriously the idea that decision-making processes are being and revised on fly based on day-to-day experiences? Would we view governance in a new light if we knew that neural development was taking place throughout the life of the individual (rather than a tiny window of rapid development) in ways that have a dramatic impact on who we are becoming? If our brains involve a degree of plasticity in their development, much of the terrain upon which politics, agency, and subjectivity have been grounded has to be reconsidered.

A Neuroplastic Subject

The term ‘neuroplastic subject’ does not denote unlimited variability in the development of the subject. Rather, it signals a *degree* of variability around a neural network that is characterized by certain elements common to most subjects. In other words, each brain is distinctive in its development and there is more of a range than we

had heretofore believed, but there isn't "an infinite modifiability" (16). Malabou uses the example of a stem cell, which has the ability to develop into a variety of different specialized cells. In most cases, we cannot determine from its initial characteristics which type of cell the stem cell will eventually become. However, we are able to predict a range of cell types into which it will develop. Stem cells are "multipotent;" "they 'transdifferentiate' themselves, that is, literally...they change their difference" (16). Brains are far more complex than stem cells—even the most basic cerebral functions require many millions of cells participating in complicated processes—but the claim is comparable: brains are multipotent. They are becoming something other than what they are, through bodily and cultural processes.

Like most of our organs, our brains are not fully formed at birth. Rather, a majority of the brain—80 percent—develops during the first 15 years of life, which involves the death of some cells and the rapid growth of others (Malabou 2008, 18). The formula for this development is a combination of a 'genetic program' and a significant degree of variability that results from the brain maturing "in the open air, in contact with the stimuli of the world, which directly influence both the development and the volume of connections" between cells (20). The brain follows a certain model in order to develop connections necessary for basic brain functioning, but these connections are distinctively developed and expanded through experience in the world. Our individual and collective experiences modify the trajectory of the neural network's development in important ways. The opposite is true, too: the absence of certain experiences results in the underdevelopment of those connections. "In effect, there is a sort of neuronal creativity

that depends on nothing but the individual's experience, his life, and his interactions with the surroundings" (21-2). Because it is significantly influenced by its milieu, I draw a close connection between what the neural network is and what I understand the subject to be. It is not known in advance *how* the neural network will develop, but it is known that it continues *to* develop. Correspondingly, we as subjects continue to develop.

The neuroscientific community is finding that synaptic connections grow in volume and intensity when they are stimulated more frequently. They have a memory, in a sense. When those synapses fire, there is a record or trace left in the neurons. If they are inactive for a period of time, the brain's functioning in that particular area will struggle. Malabou mentions a study surrounding a group black-headed titmouses in which scientists observe their ability to hide food and return to it much later with an extremely high rate of success; she links this to a much larger and more developed hippocampus. The bird—both the species and the individual—responds to repeatedly hiding something and remembering where it is at a later date. The development of the brain changes based on the bird's accumulated practices, and these imprints have effects on the brain and its processes (23). Similarly, as someone learning an instrument discovers how a 'wrong note' sounds and attempts to avoid it in the future, the experience of correcting a mistake alters the neuronal makeup of the brain. 'It' (or we?) will get better at hearing and avoiding wrong notes. Expressing this idea in neuroscientific terms looks like this:

The mechanism for depressing entry signals corresponding to incorrect movements ("mistakes") makes possible the acquisition of the correct movements. In the case of potentiated connections, synapses enlarge their area of contact, their permeability rises, and nerve conductivity is more rapid. Inversely, a little-used or "depressed" synapse tends to perform less well. (Malabou 2008, 23-4)

The conclusion is both exciting and perhaps a little anxiety inducing: experience can and does play a large role in the way the brain develops. Our brain can and does change over time. Whether we realize it or not, we are working on our brain right now and have been all of our lives. Again, it is difficult to pinpoint the ‘we’ in these formulations, but this confusion may be productive for our thinking about who we are. It may alert us to how some theories of agency are too active and others too passive.

‘We’ are not limited to or exhausted by our brains, but we cannot exist without them. When ‘we’ work on our brain, surely our brain is doing much of that work. It is possible to clarify this middle ground of ‘us’ reworking ‘us’ using the tools that we’re building. The relationship is problematic, but I want to push toward a preliminary understanding of a ‘synaptic subject,’ emerging as the sum of synaptic processes. “The essence of who you are is stored as synaptic interactions in and between the various subsystems of your brain” (LeDoux quoted in Malabou 2008, 58). ‘We’ are essentially what our synapses do, although this formulation risks oversimplifying the role culture, environment, and other variables play in the distinctive development of the self. And, it is still not totally clear what role the emergent self plays, but it appears to help make all of the sub-systems of the brain work together rather than as “an unruly mob” (Malabou, 58). A neuralnomic combination of synaptic connections, the body, and the body’s surroundings, and the body’s history constitute a preliminary ‘subject’ as it is being discussed here.

If the degree of variability that the brain enjoys is not infinite, then subjects do not start from a *tabula rasa* base that can then become anything in a short period of time. Neuroplasticity does not result in a radically free subject who can remake herself when she is armed with the knowledge of this plasticity. But nor is it the case that the brain is determined in advance or that it stops transforming at a certain point. Neural development subsists in a middle ground, “between determinism and freedom” (30). What emerges is what Malabou calls a “self-cultivating organ” that makes “supple its own biological determinations” (30). “It does this to such a degree that neural systems today appear as self-sculpted structures that, without being elastic or polymorphic, still tolerate constant self-reworking, differences in destiny, and the fashioning of a singular identity.” (30)

Because the concept of a “self-cultivating organ” challenges the stability of a self-same subject over time, neuroplasticity calls into question competing versions of subjectivity that are incongruent with the subject’s ongoing development. How do we retain who we are if there is a potential for such transformation? The first response involves memory. The subject appears to be able to undergo significant transformation without losing a sense of self because she can trace some of the change. This is especially true for those who understand the brain and the self as something that can be modified. One can remember being ‘different than’ one is today, but this does not challenge the notion that we are ‘our selves’ every day. For instance, we may remember a time before we could speak German or navigate our way around the city of Baltimore, but we don’t remember those experiences as being had by a different person.

The second answer offers a more intriguing explanation. Based on recent research, many believe that ‘we’—or our brains—produce a ‘proto-self’ that is essentially a place-holder for the self that emerges as a result. This proto-self is critical to producing “a person with a coherent personality—a fairly stable set of thoughts, emotions, and motivations” (58). The proto-self emerges in part as a response to the fact that the brain is not an “integrative totality”; that is, something whole, coherent, and demarcated with clear boundaries. Rather, and as Deleuze has noted, “cerebral space is constituted by cuts, by voids, by gaps” (quoted in Malabou 2008, 36), making it a “discontinuous space” all the way down. The void between two neurons intermediated by a synapse is an uncertain moment marked by the invitation to fire at a particular instant. A complex web of these millions of neuronal invitations over a very short period of time constitutes basic cerebral functioning, and this dynamic network changes over time. It is not, as it once appeared, that the brain is vertically organized and clearly contoured around linear continuity in a predictable fashion. Rather, “Nervous information must cross voids, and something aleatory thus introduces itself between the emission and the reception of a message, constituting the field of action of plasticity” (Malabou 2008, 36). Almost impossibly, the ‘self’ is composed of these decentralized processes. It emerges through them and as a result of them even as it plays a role in directing which ones are activated. The brain’s coping mechanism for both chasing and organizing coherency within the self is the ‘proto-self’, that “ensemble of brain devices which continuously and *nonconsciously* maintain the body within the narrow range and relative stability required for survival.” (Damasio, quoted in Malabou 2008, 59). The bird’s eye view of this complex manifold of

synaptic action appears to require at least a preliminary notion of a 'self' to tie the self together over time; this proto-self represents the self. "The key aspects of the organism...are...provided in the proto-self: the state of the internal milieu, viscera, vestibular system, and musculoskeletal frame" (Damasio, quoted in Malabou 2008, 59). Damasio's argument again highlights the important role the body plays in the development of the self (including the brain). Reducing subjectivity to the brain organ alone misses the way the self develops in a milieu, in a body, with a culture, in a particular time and context, all of which have a dramatic impact on its development. Damasio calls the proto-self a "preconscious biological precedent" "out of which alone can be developed the sense of self...and the temporal and historical permanence of the subject" (Ibid.).

The proto-self is the brain's placeholder for a richer concept of the organism. There is a back and forth 'between' the proto-self and the brain through a series of signals. The nervous system's most basic activities are directed through these signals, which are still "nonconscious" (Malabou 2008, 60). This initial set of communications becomes more and more complex and sophisticated as it extends beyond basic nervous system functions. There are steps along the way, but the communicative processes eventually end up producing "extended consciousness" and finally "conscience." (60) Only a conception of the self as a delicate mode of organization can provide the accountability necessary for a brain function such as a conscience. "[O]ne must assume that the brain somehow recounts its own becoming, that it elaborates it in the form of an 'account'" (60). Damasio argues that the interaction between the subject and the object

occurs on at least two distinct layers. On the first, the brain creates images of the objects that it encounters and these encounters “affect the state of the organism” (61). On the second, the brain “creates a swift and nonverbal account of the events that are taking place in the varied brain regions activated” by the encounter (Ibid.). There is a mapping that occurs between the proto-self and the object that is then represented in a second-order neural map. “Looking back...one might say that the swift, second-order nonverbal account narrates a story: *that of the organism caught in the act of representing its own changing state as it goes about representing something else*” (Ibid.).

Again, the notion of a plastic neural network that develops in the open air depends on the claim that ‘we’ are essentially what our synapses do, and the synaptic self (or neural subject) is a label used to denote this relationship. Who ‘we’ are is essentially a combination of: when and how frequently synapses fire, the expansion or contraction of synaptic networks due to interactions with the surrounding environment, and the ‘memory’ or record of this synaptic history that makes each subject unique.

Malabou believes there is an ideological ‘screen’ between our brains and us that obfuscates the plasticity in the neural network and the experiential dimension of neural development. This may be because such a dynamic description of the neural network would have far-reaching political consequences, and much of political discourse is predicated on an understanding of the subject that is less susceptible to change than one marked by static rigidity. Malabou’s political claim involves a simultaneous recoding of the brain and of societal power structures—both of which she believes are more diffuse and dispersed than once believed. She follows Foucault’s analysis of power while he

attempts to conceptualize an alternative to the neo-liberal world. The way we understand the brain and its functions *has an effect* on the way we understand relations of power around us. If we see our bodies and our institutions as top-down, centralized organizations sending orders down, a certain mode of politics is favored over others. The same is true for brain function: certain approaches to political intervention and activity become more effective if we take into account the degree of neuroplasticity involved in neural development. “There is today an exact correlation between descriptions of brain functioning and the political understanding of commanding,” Malabou argues (33). She believes that governance has traditionally been designed as a top-down, center-based, mechanically-oriented structure (A causes B, which causes C and so on), much like early understandings of the brain (and the subject). The methods of governance that continue to be favored today are incompatible with the plasticity of the brain (Ibid.). In other words, we would benefit from simultaneously reorienting the brain and the State as less rigid networks rather than top-down centers of power. I am persuaded by her argument, but am making a slightly different one. If we are what synapses do, and if those synaptic processes change in response to certain environmental interactions, then we are getting closer to a second mode of plastic agency that compensates for the insufficiencies found in the Sophoclean/Lucretian version of flexibility.

Neural Virtuality

Deleuze's concept of the virtual, as developed in *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze 1995), offers us resources to extend and deepen our understanding of neuroplasticity; it may insert a Lucretian swerve in neural processes. Virtuality accounts for things unfolding in a surprising fashion, and can help describe why plasticity, as opposed to flexibility, is a dynamic process. Without a notion of virtuality, it is possible to understand the self as synaptic, but such an understanding would fail to capture the role of the unexpected in neural development. In that case, the self would be determinable in predictable ways if we gathered enough information about day-to-day experience and could compute how those experiences would translate into synaptic development. Given enough information, we could essentially design synaptic selves through experiential modification.¹⁴ However, based on our previous discussion of the Lucretian swerve, synaptic development is unlikely to be so simple. Deleuze's notion of virtuality provides an account of neural transformation that cannot be anticipated in advance. The brain sometimes transforms over time in unexpected ways that are not reducible to predictable calculation or linear causality. In Deleuzian terms, the brain becomes *differentiated*. The concepts of and relationship between difference and repetition are helpful for grasping Malabou's analysis of the brain as well as this second mode of agency that I am emphasizing here. An exploration of Deleuze's more protean terms pays dividends when it is connected back up with the neural network more directly. The objective is to locate virtuality in neural processes and to understand those processes through a Lucretian lens.

¹⁴ If this were the case, there are a myriad of interesting but troublesome social engineering potentialities. For instance, we could deduce what a self is by examining what experiences it has had. Or, it would be possible to design experiences that would yield particular selves with particular traits.

One of Deleuze's goals in *Difference and Repetition* is to give an account of how ideas manifest themselves in the world—what he calls the process of actualization. There is a distinction, Deleuze argues, between actualization and something that is coming to be. Actualization cannot be described as something that has not yet occurred eventually coming to pass. Rather, it is a creative process that stems from what Deleuze calls 'larval multiplicities' of *pure difference*. This type of difference is not accessible in the sensible world; it precedes and exceeds the sensible world (Deleuze 1995, 140). It is the source of the sensible world (as well as its product—more on that later). "It is not the given but that by which the given is given" (Deleuze, 140). Actualization is a process that moves from pure difference—the realm of ideas—to the sensible, the world we encounter. This process does not always yield results that can be anticipated in advance. As under-formed, larval ideas move from that stage toward actualization and condensation, a swerve takes place along the way. Actualization is a creative process in which the potential for unexpected results is ever-present.

The process of actualization fills a gap between the virtual and the actual. For this reason, actualization is Deleuze's account of a genetic principle of that which we encounter in the world. Deleuze wants to move beyond already-existing objects and their perceptible qualities but stop short of transcendentalism (à la Kant, for example). I argue that this is a protean material process in which modes of materiality beneath the level of perception become sensible, become something we encounter. However, the material world that we encounter does not have a one-to-one correlation to the protean material from which it developed. This is why the process of actualization is a critical component

for understanding neuroplasticity. We cannot fully anticipate what the brain will do or be in the future on the basis of its current makeup. There is a degree of creative emergence in play. All of the elements for its development may be in place, but we cannot deduce from those elements what the next version of the product will be. When this neural play is compounded with the other contributing elements—culture, bodies, environments—the potential for creative emergence is further expanded.

Deleuze's sense of virtuality is helpful for understanding how linear causal and deterministic explanations of the brain are insufficient for understanding its/our development. Some elements affect us even if we cannot sense them (until after the fact, maybe). Glimpsing something sensible without being able to identify it points toward the realm beneath the sensible, toward the inscrutable, which nevertheless maintains some type of material quality. "Intensities," for instance, exist between the level of the virtual and the level of the actual. We experience the effect that they have on the actual, but because they stem from differential elements on the side of the virtual, we cannot identify them until they have actualized (and have therefore moved beyond intensities). Intensities bridge the gap, or the void, between the virtual and the actual. From a Lucretian perspective, intensities are comparable to the swerve that is invited by the void between primordia falling in laminar flow. And when a swerve takes place, and a series of collisions produce an unexpected chain of events, we can say that elements beneath the level of the sensible creatively actualized in a way that produced an unanticipated set of sensible effects. When we encounter something in the sensible range, we experience those genetic intensities indirectly through those things that have actualized: "we know

intensity only as already developed within an extensity, and as covered over by qualities” (Deleuze 1995, 223). Intensities, like the swerve, impel something from the virtual to burst (or seep, or push, or melt) into the actual, but they themselves may remain unidentifiable, or sub-identifiable. We can sense what has been actualized, but we cannot sense the genetic origins of those objects.

Deleuze marks four overlapping ‘stages’ or categories for the movement from the virtual to the actual. None is distinct from the others; Deleuze seems to use them as conceptual placeholders that yield a clearer picture of the process of actualization. The first stage involves what Deleuze calls ‘differentiation.’ Differentiation refers to ‘*pure difference*,’ and exists in the realm of the virtual. (Differentiation, on the other hand, is what Deleuze calls ‘different *from*,’ and will be discussed in the fourth stage). In this realm, virtual relations between differential elements (atoms? ideas? concepts?) swirl around each other. Each has what Deleuze calls a *distinct* relation with the others, because each is completely and utterly differentiated from the others. They are conceptually separate and cannot be drawn into a relation of resemblance. However, in addition to being distinct from each other, they are also obscure to us because they have yet to actualize into the realm of the sensible. (Deleuze 1995, 165, 213) Their obscurity stems from our inability to identify them even if we may sense their effects or eventually sense what they end up becoming. Differentiation, or pure difference, is the realm of the virtual. It is a rich terrain of creative emergence that is irreducible to linear or efficient chains of causality. We cannot see in advance how the realm of the virtual will actualize. If we could, its genetic virtual component would be non-existent, and time would cease to

add anything new or original to existence. If what has yet to happen is going to happen, and it is only a matter of events unfolding along a pre-ordained path, then the creative characteristic of time is eliminated. Only when the passage of time brings with it the potential for something creative or unexpected to happen does it have any real meaning for us.

In order to better understand what Deleuze means by time, it may be helpful to look at the way he contrasts the 'virtual' with the 'possible.' The possible denotes an unfolding of time, in which future events are merely events lingering in the possible that have not yet happened. The difference between the future and the present is merely that the future has not occurred yet. Only their status of future, present, and past changes—the events themselves do not. The possible requires a linear notion of time: the past determines the future in ways that can in principle be calculated in advance. Deleuze argues that such a conception of time is too straightforward and fails to account for the richness of time as it surprises us. Time becomes unimportant if it only denotes whether something has happened in the past, is happening, or will happen in the future. Rather, the virtual captures the way time doesn't merely unfold as a matter of course—it actualizes. Actualization is the creative emergence of the virtual. The importance of time in the process of actualization cannot be overstated. It is not a timeline or a mechanical unfolding. The way something actualizes from the virtual can only be grasped retroactively. Prior to it occurring in that particular way, there was no way to reliably anticipate how the future would develop. This is why the virtual is far richer than the

possible, and also why a Deleuzian virtual is so critically important for expanding the neuroscientific stance on plasticity.

In the second stage—individuation—intensities play their most important role. Elements from the virtual edge closer to the threshold of being actualized: “individuation is the act by which intensity determines differential relations to be actualized” (Deleuze 1995, 246). If we go back to the realm of the virtual, in which differential elements are swirling around each other, individuation begins to siphon off and gather together a few of these differential elements, eventually constituting several *series* of elements. The points gathered are differentiated (distinct and obscure) from one another and not yet actualized into the realm of the sensible. Deleuze believes that this constellation of different points constitutes a complex curve or structure that emerges with a unique ‘perspective’: it has never been sensed before and will never be sensed again. The individual points that are gathered from the realm of the virtual may not be unique when isolated, but the specific combination of these elements that come together in the process of individuation emerges as something unlike anything else. Unique complexity emerges from simple and distinct elements. This process is, counter-intuitively, a process of repetition with a difference—repetition is what allows the virtual to actualize. Without it, there is no genetic component for this creative emergence. (More on this later.) Two examples may be helpful for illustrating this. A finite number of letters can come together to form words, sentences, paragraphs, and eventually new and unique ideas. Out of language’s simplest elements, complex and unique ideas can emerge; the fact that only basic elements are the starting points does not limit the level of complexity or

sophistication that emerges through language. Or, to take an example Malabou uses, simple cellular structures—neurons, dendrites, axon, synaptic energy—function in an assemblage to carry out complex tasks. Something begins to come together without us being able to recognize or identify it. Deleuze might call this intensive emergence. Neuroscientists could point to an element of plasticity in this process of emergence.

The third stage of actualization involves what Deleuze calls Spatial Temporal Dynamism (or simply, ‘dramatization’), in which the movement is made between the virtual and the actual. Dramatization is the trigger stage for the individuated, as it moves from the gathered virtual points toward the realm of the sensible (Deleuze 1995, 245-6). A moment of crystallization culminates in something that we can sense; something is actualizing. The constellation of points, which was purely virtual, begins to emerge. Importantly, this process is unpredictable and creative, and the entity that emerges at the end is different from the sum of its elemental points: “actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate” (212). The timing of this third stage is unpredictable, which is why it involves an element of drama. It begins in the realm of the virtual, so it cannot be recognized in advance, but it ends in the world of the sensible. Dramatization is impossible to precisely predict or control, because it is not merely the unfolding of the yet-to-be. Sub-sensual intensities begin to bubble to the surface, until they finally condense into something in the sensible world at a particular moment. Deleuze also calls this a moment of coagulation (189) because it is a gathering of smaller elements that come together as a complex assemblage. The process involved is filled with creative potential.

Finally, Deleuze names the fourth stage ‘differentiation.’ The actual can now be sensed as such. We encounter the object in the realm of the sensible. It is no longer differentiated because it bears a resemblance to other things within this realm of the sensible. It is now differentiated from other things—it is different *from* other things rather than embodying *pure difference*. These objects are the products of pure difference but are no longer differentiated when they become actualized in the sensible realm. As opposed to their relations being described as distinct and obscure, they are now described as clear and confused: they are clear because we can sense them, but confused because their relations are no longer purely differentiated from one another.

Coming up with a tangible example of this process of actualization is difficult. Deleuze uses Leibniz’s example of a wave crashing. The noise made by the crashing wave is constituted by a myriad of individual and particular particles, each with their own singular principles. We cannot sense each particle involved in the wave. What we hear is the aggregate of their sounds in concert. But, we would not be able to hear the wave at all if it were not for the individual particles making their imperceptible noises. The wave is clear and confused: we can clearly hear the wave, but the relations that constitute it are confused. The individuated elements that exist prior to the actualized wave exist in pure difference: their relations are differential until they emerge together as an actualized wave.

We could also turn to the model of a neural network for an example. The brain’s individuated, pre-actualized elements cannot be identified individually. But the *effect* of their interaction as an assemblage can be sensed, sometimes identified, and analyzed.

Deleuze explains that individuation arises from ‘metastable systems’ in which there is no secure unity or static environment (246). A neural network marked by a degree of neuroplasticity may be one such system. It is a realm in flux, with a fluid distribution of elements (neurons, synapses, and so on) involving different degrees of disparity on different orders, all of which provide a heterogeneous climate from which intensive potentialities may actualize (Ibid.). The brain ‘actualizes’ in creative ways because it is not determined in advance—it moves from the virtual to the actual in ways that we cannot anticipate. Neural relations constitute a “distribution of potentials” (Ibid.), and neural processes emerge according to which of these potential relations are activated and which are not. In the neural environment, certain resonances may develop between these potentials; if the right combination of elements is involved, “the actualization of a potential and the establishing of communication between disparates” (Ibid.) may occur, resulting in corresponding brain activity.

The distinction made between differentiation and differenciation can help clarify what the concept of the virtual contributes to neuroplasticity. A constrained set of possible and predictable futures for the brain could be understood as the brain differentiating itself. In such a model, change occurs over time, but can largely be predicted and has a restricted set of possible outcomes. Such an approach to the brain would eliminate or severely mitigate a notion of plasticity in neural processes. A brain that *differentiates* itself, on the other hand, would amplify and expand a concept of neuroplasticity. Virtuality lends itself to a supple, dynamic, and creative neural network, in which something creative that could not have been predicted in advance can emerge.

However, this emergence does not happen in an instance. Rather, it develops through complex repetition with a difference.

Repetition and the Syntheses of Time

At first, it may appear that repetition is antithetical to the concept of difference that has been developed here. From one perspective, the act of repeating would inhibit and undermine the actualization of difference, preventing the emergence of the new. If this were the case, the plastic processes involved in the neural network would not yield creative actualization. They would instead take on existing forms again and again, molding the ‘plastic’ of the network in the same way each time. However, Deleuze’s notion of repetition confounds this return of the same. From a neural perspective, repetition’s role in the development of the neural network is critical to its degree of plasticity. Repetition in any process can never result in a replication of the past, according to Deleuze.

There is an element of difference included in repetition, Deleuze argues, because each repetition folds a record of its previous occurrence into the most recent occurrence. (Deleuze 1995, 3) The potential for newness always subsists in this case, because something that has already happened can never be replicated. Repetition is thus a ‘transgression’ (Ibid.); something new emerges *in* repetition (6) that fails to fit cleanly within the parameters of representation (18). The excess to such a repetition stems from *time*; something cannot repeat without time differentiating between the first, second,

third, etc., time something happens. In this sense, repetition is not *antithetical* to the virtual actualizing as something new; it is *intrinsic to the process*.

Deleuze turns back to Bergson to unpack this counter-intuitive claim. Our experience of time is neither of a linear timeline in which each chronological segment leads directly to the next as the preceding one fades into the nothingness of the past, nor a collection of instant snapshots animated into a moving version of time. Rather, time as we experience it is a contraction of time. The present moment is composed of a layered selection of the past, the experience of the living present, and a movement toward the future. The present is not distinct from the future or the past. The present doesn't come to be without the past, and it is defined in part by what future it is folding into. The imagination *contracts* the past and the future into a 'living present' in which the posterior of the present moment is a selection of the past (that was once present) and the anterior is bleeding into a future that will be constituted by the present and the past. The past that is in memory—what Deleuze calls the pure past—is still 'living.' It is distinct from the past as it was experienced in real time. It is rich terrain for something new to emerge. That is to say, we get something new and different out of the past as we experience a present moment that contracts some of the past into itself. "The past and future do not designate instants distinct from a supposed present instant, but rather the dimensions of the present itself in so far as it is a contraction of instants" (71). The past is something new after it is no longer the present, but it also remains part of the present as we experience each moment. We experience time as movement that involves memory, the past, a protraction, and movement into the future. This is what Deleuze means by 'contraction': those

components of time are drawn together to constitute our experience of time. We would not have a cogent sense of experience if it were a set of disparate moments or snapshots. For Bergson (according to Deleuze), “The present does not have to go outside itself in order to pass from past to future” (Deleuze 1995, 71). This is what makes it a living present, a past contracted and a future to come.

Deleuze does not believe that the past is unrelated to the future, but he also does not believe that we can determine the future by examining the past. Just as the brain I have in the future is neither discernible nor disconnected from my current brain, we cannot reliably predict the future from the past even though the future will be constituted by it. The past does indeed constitute the future but it does not do so in a predictable manner. This is precisely why virtuality is so critical to this notion of time—it gives time its creative component. The present and the future may be composed of a selection of the past, but we do not know what this selection or its resulting present will be in advance. Again, time does not merely *unfold*, it creatively actualizes. Such a position does not do away with the past as the source of the present and future; rather, it enriches it by imbuing it with a creative component that goes beyond models of efficient causality.

Bergsonian contractions, or syntheses, of time can be organized on three levels. Passive synthesis refers to a synthesis of habit. This is the synthesis that deals with immediate and everyday reactions: when we see X, we expect to see Y immediately after because we have many times before. We have a reaction to an encounter with X and this reaction does not need to develop in the pure past (‘memory’) in order to occur. It is a habitual response, and as the name implies, this synthesis does not occur in an active

way. It is a basis of time, for Deleuze, because it is the synthesis that makes the present moment a *living* present; each moment is encountered as a specific moment that references the generality of the past built through habit. The general refers to something like a loose rule-building function based on the experience of repetition: what did I do the last time something like this happened? The specific case refers to an instant, which, when repeated over and over, helps build a general rule. The interaction with the present moves from specific to general, through a contraction of the habit-infused present and a response that forms the immediate future. This contraction does not have a one-to-one correlation to similar moments in the past, however. Rather, Deleuze argues that habit draws something new from repetition. Even if the encounter in the present seems to resemble an encounter in the past that invoked a particular response, this moment is not a bare repetition. Deleuze argues, via Bergson, that there can be no repetition of the same because time is always a contraction of what has happened in the past. As explained above, the moment at hand involves a contraction of a previous moment—a contraction that could not have existed before the present moment arrives. If this is true, then every contraction is a ‘repetition with a difference.’ The contraction involves a unique selection of the past, combined with a unique experience of the living present, added to a movement toward the future that we cannot know in advance. When a word is repeated, the second time it is heard is different than the first. This is because when we hear it the second time, we experience that word alongside a recent memory of it being said before: we experience the contraction of those two elements (and many more). Something *new* is drawn from repetition, even in a passive synthesis.

The second synthesis is an active one: a memory of the past is synthesized with the experience of the present moment. It is a contraction of our experience of the past and an encounter with the moment at hand, in which we draw something from our memory of a *present moment that once was* but is something distinct when recollected. The present moment is still constituted by the joint experience of the past and present moment, but it is an active synthesis rather than one of habit. Deleuze believes, following Bergson, that all of the past is in some way preserved, and he calls this the pure past. He does not mean that all of the past is stored somewhere in memory. Rather, Deleuze means that the present moment is constituted by a contraction of all that is the past. Our memory is a selective account of what has occurred in the past as we recall it in a present moment. What happens in the present is the non-deterministic result of everything that has happened in the past. An active synthesis involves contracting a selection of that pure past with the experience of the present.

The third synthesis is even more difficult to pin down, as it involves a movement into the future. This movement is in part constituted by both the pure past and the contraction of the present with the past, but it is *unconditioned* by both. In the third synthesis,

the present is no more than an actor, an author, an agent destined to be effaced; while the past is no more than a condition operating by default. The synthesis of time here constitutes a future which affirms at once both the unconditioned character of the product in relation to the conditions of its production, and the independence of the work in relation to its author or actor. (Deleuze 1995, 94)

This third synthesis produces the new, and it does so through repetition. “We produce something new only on condition that we repeat—once in the mode which constitutes the

past, and once more in the present of metamorphosis. Moreover, what is produced, the absolutely new itself, is in turn nothing but repetition: the third repetition” (90). Each synthesis is a repetition, but not a repetition of the same. As above, something new is *drawn from* repetition, and this is exemplified by the third synthesis. It is in this synthesis that Deleuze believes Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return is housed. The eternal return is not a cyclical return of something that has happened before, as if time repeated itself. The eternal return is instead a selective process in which only certain elements return, and this leads to the production of something new. That is to say, *what returns is the ever-present potential for something novel to emerge from repetition*. The eternal return (or the third synthesis) is the element that complicates time as a simple circle: it is a “much more secret, much more tortuous, more nebulous circle, an eternally excentric circle, the decentered circle of difference which is re-formed uniquely in the third time of the series” (91). What returns bears no resemblance to what has come before it (241).

The virtual/actual relationship follows the same logic as the three syntheses of time. The process of actualization, from the sub-sensible realm of the virtual through intensification and dramatization and finally to the emergence of something we can sense, is analogous to the process of the past moving through a living present into the future. They both include an element of creativity, in which present conditions are insufficient for determining in advance what a future event will be. We cannot determine a line of causality prior to its emergence.

Neural Repetition with a Difference

How does this interpretation connect with the discussion of neural function? The concept of complex repetition and difference (newness) that emerges helps enrich our understanding of how the neural network operates. By overlaying Deleuze's conceptions of both difference and repetition on top of neuroplasticity, the goal is to develop an approach to agency that transmutes the idea of flexibility into plasticity. The brain is constituted through repetition with a difference as it actualizes in unanticipated ways. It is a contraction of the past which has helped constitute its plastic nature, the present in which it is experiencing the world, and the third synthesis of time in which it is unconditioned by either the present or the past. The neural network is thus saved from biological determinism from being a disjointed series of barely related snapshots in time. Instead, the brain and the neural network in which it is involved is a milieu in which individuation occurs. Something unique emerges from the basic material components within each of us. The neural network resists static definitions precisely because the experience of time combined with a neuroplastic understanding of neural processes means that it is never in fact *being* one thing or another; it is always on its way to *becoming* something else.

The same logic applies to individuals. The distinctive configuration of each self, constituted but not determined by a unique set of experiences along the way, is always actualizing into something new. Deleuze writes "Every body, every thing, thinks and is a thought to the extent that, reduced to its intensive reasons, it expresses an idea the actualization of which it determines...the thinker himself makes his individual

differences from all manner of things” (Deleuze 1995, 254). It is not as though a stable Idea produces each individual (and indeed, each *thing*). Rather, each individual is constituting itself in process through a series of repetitions that lead to the development of something always again new. In a passage describing an individual of eternal return, Deleuze’s language could just as easily be applied to the plastic quality of the neural network: “The multiple, mobile and communicating character of individuality, its implicated character, must therefore be constantly recalled. The indivisibility of the individual pertains solely to the property of intensive quantities not to divide without changing nature” (254). The subject—us—is made up of mobile and dynamic characteristics that stem from the very basic elements in us. These elements may not be unique, but their configuration in each of us constitutes something individual that can never be replicated or precisely identified. The individual as it appears to us is that of differentiation: we encounter the individual as different *from* other individuals as if there were a finite range of diverse bodies to be identified, but this is merely evidence for the cancellation of pure difference through the process of individual actualization. It is a supple process of becoming. Differentiation covered over by differentiation.

Because this particular account attempts to grapple with subjectivity as a political and theoretical concept, the focus has been on the emergence of the self. From a Lucretian standpoint, it is equally important to acknowledge the role of the milieu from which the subject emerges. We cannot divorce a subject from the material milieu she occupies; they are inextricably linked. The logic of actualization as well as the logic of time extends to the emergence of the subject: the environment in which a subject is found

is sufficient for determining how that subject will emerge, but not in a predictable way. In other words, the milieu doubtlessly plays *the* critical role in the way a subject develops, but we cannot make this determination in advance. The conditions of each milieu sustain creative emergence. There can always be a swerve, or an element of virtuality, that confounds models of predictable causality. For Deleuze, there is no sharp distinction between the way we develop as subjects and the way the material realm emerges: because we are essentially complex systems composed of material elements, the logic of actualization applies to both.

Based on this line of argument, how can we recap what the neural network might look like? By drawing together a Lucretian perspective, a Deleuzian concept of the virtual, and Malabou's explanation of neuroplasticity, the neural-plastic subject emerges as:

- An intensive field of individuation;
- A highly complex and plastic milieu of sub-sensible elements that combine and interact in malleable ways;
- A set of highly organized and often aleatory processes resulting in development that cannot be defined in advance;
- Reliant upon repetition with a difference—what repeats are non-exchangeable singularities that cannot be subordinated to a field of representation;
- An unmediated participant in the world, in flux as a result of experience without a middle term (e.g. a sovereign subject) that negotiates between the world and itself;

- Constituted through time as a contraction of habit, memory, and *movement toward the future*;
- A realm of the virtual, actualizing in creative ways;
- A set of non-localizable connections and resonances between different elements—in this case, bits of the brain;
- Constituted by a contraction of the entire past, while remaining partially undetermined by this past;
- A spatio-temporal space of drama and theatre, in which the unexpected can play an important role in both development, behavior, and ‘decision-making’;
- Irreducible to bare representation, efficient causality, deterministic development, and static identity.

Drawing the Virtual

Brian Massumi also believes that the virtual plays a central role in the way events play out. Like Deleuze, Massumi believes that the world is not primarily a stable set of relations between static objects. Rather, he sees the world as “always-in-germ” (2002, 6) and our experience of the world pointing toward the role of the virtual in actualization. I turn to Massumi in hopes of enriching this notion of the virtual, and of subjectivity as a mobile and differentiating movement rather than a linear-deterministic unfolding of the possible. For Massumi, interactive arts are both evidence of, and a good way to think through, a negotiation of the relation between the virtual and the actual. By pushing

further on the way the virtual undergirds that which we encounter, Massumi argues that virtuality and actuality are not in a binary relationship, but operate on interacting and overlapping planes. A particular take on art is one way to sense these two overlapping levels of experience.¹⁵

We experience the effects of virtuality, but since the effects often bleed into the conditions from which they emerge, it is difficult to distinguish between where one starts and the other stops. Massumi's understanding of the world existing in a state of non-deterministic functioning is compatible with the Lucretian analysis offered in the first chapter and the Deleuzian analysis above. We experience this fluctuation to varying degrees at different points. The experience of a surprise—an unanticipated result—hints at a world that is less static and more flux. "One of the roles of the concept of the virtual... is to make *surprise* a universal, constitutive force in the world's becoming" (Massumi 2002, 16). Massumi, following Deleuze, takes surprise to be central to the experience of dramatization.¹⁶ Some art might, too. Massumi believes that when our sensual perception picks up on something more or different than what we actually recognize in a piece of art, we are sensing the virtual. We complete the image by filling in the gaps that we expect to find. The process of completing the image may require us to speculate based on what we can sense from the picture, which is often a creative process of inserting something original into the piece of art. This is not limited to our interaction with art; we can have this experience every day, too. But art sometimes calls our attention

¹⁵ Massumi readily admits that there are other ways, and he guesses at a few. I outline a couple of my own speculative tactics toward the end of this chapter.

¹⁶ Sophocles' plays also center around this experience of drama. Characters are surprised to discover a new piece of information that is often revealed dramatically. Their reaction to these events contributes to the drama of the play.

to such moments, and make us more sensitive to the role of the virtual in our everyday perception of the world.

Another experience that can point to a world that is constantly becoming is the experience of being overwhelmed by an encounter. “‘Pure’ experience is not the least reduced or impoverished. It is overfull. It is brimming ‘virtually or potentially’” (Massumi 2002, 10). Experience can overwhelm our ability to make sense of it or to organize it. Experience is a mobile and dynamic thing, and its richness can be attributed to the realm of the virtual. With the help of hindsight, we can sometimes retroactively conclude that what we were perceiving was a tiny sliver of what was occurring around us. We could not sense, make sense of, or organize what we were experiencing it as we sensed it. As Deleuze argues, it is often our encounter with something we cannot recognize that compels us to begin to think things differently. The virtual is the embryonic future of an event emerging creatively that we could not have anticipated: “the virtual is abstract event potential” (Massumi 2002, 16). Massumi encourages us to grow more attentive to unruly moments brimming with what we sense; we can enhance our ability to ‘see’ more or differently. We can even get closer to ‘sensing’ the virtual as it creatively actualizes.¹⁷

To cleave the virtual from the actual is a mistake, according to Massumi—one that can only be made by misreading of Deleuze and his sources. Only the virtual and the actual together provide a genetic account of what we encounter in life. Deleuze often separates two terms in what appear to be a binary only to reconnect them; as the two gain

¹⁷ The neural network shares this characteristic, too. It involves a degree of virtuality, so it, too, is actualizing in creative ways.

more nuanced explanations, we can see how they were separated only as an exercise, and are essentially inter-involved. The paradox of the virtual's existence within the actual is, for Massumi, because it helps us to *sense* virtuality and hopefully to *think* virtuality (Massumi, 18). The contradiction of the virtual existing within the actual "has been actively converted into a creative factor that is liminally immanent to the process" of thinking the virtual (19). Because the virtual and the actual appear to function in polarity (actuality being what we encounter, virtuality being the genetic component for what we might encounter in the future), it takes what Massumi calls "conceptual calisthenics" see their interrelation and coexistence within our experience of the world. But, he insists, the effort is worthwhile: "The key is always to hold to the virtual as a coincident dimension of every event's occurrence. Again: don't take this as a dichotomy, but as a creative differential, one essentially [sic] ingredient to every experience to the extent that every experience is an occasion of lived abstraction" (18). Without backing away from Deleuze's distinction between the actual and the virtual, we need to think them together, or think through them together. Doing so becomes more manageable if we draw from Lucretius' understanding of materiality, in which everything has a material component. In addition to the material that we sense, there is material that exists below the threshold of our senses. But, both are equally 'material' in their existence. It is conceivable to describe a progression from the sub-sensible to the sensible without claiming the existence of something that is not material, at least in the sense of being a fluid process on the way to constitution. Perhaps looking back we can see those elements that contributed to the encounter with what we could eventually sense, but this could not have

been deduced in advance. We can describe Lucretian primordia falling in laminar flow until a swerve produces a collision, eventually resulting in the material emergence of something new. Or we could describe tiny synaptic fields developing based on the body/brain network's interaction with the world. What is it that constitutes that synaptic interaction? By this Lucretian reading, synaptic interaction, like everything else, is material. The concept of the virtual is constituted by the material existence of certain elements interacting with each other, or sub-sensible differential relations of intensities emerging creatively. Or, put differently, by the virtual, actualizing. The trick is to never to separate the virtual from the 'in-act' (Massumi, 18).

Massumi believes that some art—particularly occurrent art—helps us attend to the virtual without having a full grasp of how we 'sense' it. "Art is the technique for making that necessary but normally unperceived fact perceptible" (45). It can be a tool to call attention to the virtual. "Art is the technique of living life *in*—experiencing the virtuality of it more fully" (Ibid.). There are many reasons why this is the case and why art plays such a central role in our ability to perceive that which supposed to be below our level of perception. For our purposes, though, the notion that there are certain lenses that can help us sense the virtual without relegating it to the world of the actual or dismissing it as non-material helps us think through the the apparent contradiction between the virtual and the actual in more productive ways. It also helps us consider the role of plasticity: in one sense, plasticity is the merging of the virtual and the actual without losing the richness of the former or the significance of the latter. The neural network is the equivalent of what Massumi calls event-potential. It is a collection of mobile components that are on their

way to becoming something else. Plasticity indicates both their ability to change configurations—to take different forms—but also to change how we sense the world around us. Paying attention to the role of the virtual can help our neural processes—themselves examples of plasticity—*become* something different. As the network differentiates itself, we differentiate ourselves.

By tying together Lucretius, Malabou, Deleuze, and Massumi, neural processes emerge as a collection of material elements that come together in virtual potentialities, the trajectory of which cannot be defined in advance. The neural network is an ongoing occurrence that exceeds and differentiates itself, like the Lucretian flow:

Elements contributing to an occurrence come into relation when they come into effect, and they come into effect in excess over themselves. In themselves, they are disparate. If they are in tension, it is as a function of the differential between their positions. It is as a function of their distances from each other. The factors do not actually connect. Their distance is enveloped in a field effect that is one with the tension culminating in the strike of an event. The event effectively takes off from its elements' contribution to it. (Massumi 2002, 20)

The result of the laminar flow exceeds the sum of the elements that constitute it without relying on anything non-material. By this reading, it is possible to work with the materiality of the virtual without eliminating one or the other.

Massumi calls attention to the virtual through occurrent arts, but there may be other ways to point to the virtuality and plasticity of neural processes. Ian Bogost, a video game designer and academic researcher, has identified a myriad of different things to do with video games. All of them, I argue, rely on an understanding of the brain that exceeds and confounds a linear, deterministic model. Some of them illuminate the way our neural network develops when it is confronted with an interactive video game. The network

accumulates skills as it becomes more and more comfortable with the gameplay. The game's operation has an effect on several different neural levels both above and below the intellectual level. And, because the neural network is plastic, engaging in video games impacts on the way synaptic networks develop. Video games are not merely entertaining or recreational hobbies; they have influence the development of us as subjects.

In his book *How To Do Things With Videogames*, Bogost identifies twenty different 'uses' of video games, ranging from reverence to relaxation. Each section uses examples to illustrate the way video games are more than mere entertainment: they also 'do' things. For instance, his section on habit can be mapped onto the above discussion of repetition and the first synthesis of time. The premise, Bogost argues, is that a game is often designed to be "easy to learn and hard to master" (Bogost 2011, 125). This follows Nolan Bushnell's law that, in an era of coin-operated video arcades, the game should "reward the first quarter and the hundredth" (Ibid.). However, Bogost asserts that it is not quite the case that all the best games are easy to learn. In fact, the seemingly simplistic Atari game Pong "isn't easy to learn, at all, for someone who has never played or seen racquet sports. Without a knowledge of such sports, the game would seem just as alien as a space battle around a black hole" (126). Instead, Pong relied on a working familiarity with the goal of racquet sports, and represented those familiar themes on a screen. A user familiar with those goals translated the familiar objectives of sports into the skills necessary to accomplish the equivalent goal on the screen. "Habituation builds on prior conventions" (127) rather than attempting to build new ones. Bogost notes the way Nintendo's Wii Sports involves a similar approach. The multi-sport game invites users to

get familiar with recently developed motion controllers by utilizing them in ultra-familiar contexts: on the tennis court, the baseball diamond, the golf course, and so on. In Wii's case, the translation was even more straightforward, as the physical motions of the user roughly matched the physical motions of an athlete participating in those sports.¹⁸ The process continues, of course. Once Pong becomes a popular sensation, it becomes its own convention, and other games can be designed around the skill set and familiar themes that are presented in it. The same is the case for Tetris and its successors, Column and Dr. Mario. "Mechanical simplicity is less important than conceptual familiarity" (Bogost 2011, 128). Video game familiarity can come from previous experiences as well as from games encountered in the past.

Familiarity, prior conventions, repetition, and habit are critical components of a game's popularity. They are also the defining qualities of the first synthesis of time discussed above. Without delving into the pure past, our experiences sediment in a way that helps us process movements quickly based on the way we've done in the past: the negative consequence of doing something 'wrong' stays with the brain as a habit develops. Similarly, a simple reward will help reinforce the brain's 'choice' in responding to a situation, effectively building a habit. Video games are designed to penalize and reward in such a way that the user learns the ropes of the video game quickly but does not 'master' the game for a period of time (if ever). Bushnell's law has been misunderstood in the following way: "it doesn't explain the phenomenon [of why people continue to play games they have not mastered in the way] we have assumed it

¹⁸ It is also true that users can develop work-around strategies that do not mimic the 'actual' sports performances. New bodily habits specific to the user interface can and are developed along the way.

does. Instead, it suggests that games can culture familiarity by constructing habitual experiences. They do so by finding receptors for familiar mechanics and tuning them slightly differently so as to make those receptors resonate in a gratifyingly familiar way” (Bogost 2011, 133). In Deleuzian terms, video games thrive on repetition with a difference.

Video games can work on other registers besides habit. Like other media, they reflect and intervene in political and ethical domains, some more explicitly than others. For example, Bogost discusses a game called “Darfur is Dying,” in which the user plays as a child in Darfur. The character must avoid the Janjaweed militia who ride around in Jeeps carrying guns. As Bogost explains, the first task of the game is straightforward but not simple: it requires making it to a well to fill a water container and returning to camp. An encounter with a Jeep does not end well for the character. Unlike many games, the main character is not powerful or strong in relation to the enemies s/he encounters. Rather, s/he must avoid enemies because of this power disparity. In order to succeed, the user must recognize that being noticed means getting killed. It is not an equal playing field, and there are no one-up’s or bonus rounds. The game is about a helpless family facing a powerful genocidal militia intent on killing them; keeping one’s head down is the only option for survival. Bogost calls this “cowering” rather than merely being covert. Soon, though, the goals of the game change as it becomes more of a management style game. Rationing water, using minimal resources wisely, growing crops, and building huts are the keys to survival (Bogost 2011, 21). The designer’s goal seems clear: to design a game about genocide in order to raise awareness of the situation in Darfur. As the user

plays the game, s/he may be provoked to consider the plight of those facing genocide, even if that's not the reason they started playing the game.

Bogost also discusses a short game called Hush!, in which one plays the role of a mother attempting to quiet a Tutsi baby in order to avoid roving bands of Hutu soldiers. It is a rhythm-based game; hitting the right keys at the right time will successfully quiet the child, while mistiming a few keystrokes gains the attention of the soldiers, and the screen fades to red. "Proceduralist games are oriented toward introspection over both immediate gratification, as is usually the case in entertainment games, and external action, whether immediate or deferred, as is usually the case in serious games" (Bogost 2011, 14).

Ideally, the game play causes an encounter with something--it invokes a reaction from us. This reaction is a combination of different syntheses of time. The habitual skills gained through the reward/penalty familiarity of the game interact with a more introspective encounter with something *new*. That something new may be relating someone else's plight or to something in one's past, or it could bring a new situation into the view of the user, incurring a response. The syntheses of time are interrelated and there is a contraction of the three: habit, pure past, and a movement into the future. Some video games may be effective tools for calling attention to this contraction, and being attentive to the way video games 'do things' may be one place to start intervening in the neuroplasticity of the brain.

Flexibility, Plasticity, Consolidation

Knowingly or not, the Sophocles' major characters predicate their ontological and epistemological beliefs on a world of near-certainty, in which one framework or another can be relied upon to ground decisions of right and wrong, true or false. Those decisions are made on the assumption that events will proceed as predicted. When the plot takes a turn, and something goes awry, they are left wondering where they went wrong. What piece of information did they miss that resulted in this turn of events? By the time they start this calculus, it is often too late. By reading Sophocles through a Lucretian lens, these diversions can be taken to express unpredictable swerves, in which an atom inexplicably shifts course and crashes into a neighbor. The atoms that had been traveling parallel to each other now collide and carom. In some cases, these collisions will produce something new that is within our range of the sensible. Sometimes what is produced subsists below the sensible range but may have an effect on what is encountered. In either case, the swerve—that tiny veer into the void between two atoms—is the genetic principle for what we encounter. The swerve in the Sophoclean plot produces a drama that drives the tragedy.

Some minor characters, on the other hand, pursue a different strategy: flexibility. This takes several different forms, but all hinge on an uncertainty regarding the outcome of transpiring events. The Sentry questions himself again and again in a committee of selves. Jocasta asks that the 'investigation' into Oedipus' past be dropped in order to 'go with the flow' of fate. And Haemon devises and executes a multi-pronged strategy to subtly subvert Creon's decision on Antigone's fate; he realizes that a direct, forceful, purely rational approach will be counter-productive given Creon's stubbornness. Haemon

softly criticizes Creon's steadfastness despite a background of new information and the opportunity to rethink his decision. If we map these strategies onto a Lucretian world of materiality, these three characters seem better equipped to deal with an encounter with the unexpected. Their flexibility leaves certain options open, whereas the sovereign's inflexibility forecloses them and produces the conditions for tragic conclusions.

Flexibility is periodically critical, it seems, for making decisions about how to proceed. But it is also insufficient for describing subjectivity or advising us on how to intervene in a world of unpredictability. Plasticity—flexibility's more active counterpart—fills in some of the gaps. As Malabou notes, flexibility is plasticity without its genius. Neuroplasticity offers an account of the way our neural networks develop in dynamic and creative ways, clearing the way for creative responses that would not make sense if our brains were deterministic or static organs. It reminds us that changes in our experiences and interactions invariably 'work' on the neural network, changing it on the neuronal level. It means that we are not static and stable animals that will be selfsame over time. Amplifying flexibility, especially in times of rapid change, can also facilitate and maximize the plasticity we experience. By opening ourselves up to new approaches, ideas, and experiences, the synaptic fields that fire as a result begin to expand. When agency is open to flexibility and plasticity, a deep pluralism (à la William Connolly) results in a mobile and dynamic subjectivity. This mode subjectivity is better equipped to navigate a world of becoming than one mired in stubborn determination and the experience of *ressentiment* that usually accompanies such a sensibility when things inevitably do not actualize as predicted.

The distinction made above between the virtual and the possible is helpful for differentiating flexibility from plasticity. If time were governed by the possible—in which several different outcomes are foretold, but cannot be specified prior to their occurrence—it would be productive to adopt a flexible sensibility. Jocasta’s ‘going with the flow’ would be preferable to Creon’s stubbornness in a world in which multiple outcomes are possible. However, if time is understood as having a virtual component, a concept of plasticity becomes more helpful for adapting to a world of creative emergence. The creative actualization of time cannot be boiled down to several different outcomes that are on our radar based on present conditions.¹⁹ Rather, we must observe carefully, stay alert to swerving trajectories, adapt quickly but sensibly, and intervene in creative ways in order to avoid resenting something that eludes our mastery. The last part—creative intervention—is the step that moves beyond mere flexibility. It is not the bold and willful intervention of Creon, and it is not the borderline ambivalence of Jocasta. Intervening must be attuned to the creative emergence of new variables and unexpected developments while still attempting to nudge the action one way or another in order to achieve political ends.

The third approach to agency, taken up in the next chapter, involves a deliberate moment of repose, in which one resists an instinct or pressure to intervene quickly, opting instead for a small delay. I argue that during periods of rapid fluctuation, in which one has difficulty processing the amount of information received, it is sometimes critical to take such a moment of repose. Such a delay in intervention can often allow a subject (or a

¹⁹ For this conception of time, I am drawing in part from the work of Samuel Chambers, particularly in *Untimely Politics*, in which he understands time to be an unpredictable and creative process rather than one dictated by linear causality or predictable timelines.

group or state or so forth) to better observe the action's trajectories, and better strategize a way forward. In the intervening time, new and creative options may emerge, or conditions may change in ways that make the original range of options insufficient or irrelevant. A moment of repose is a mode of agency that emphasizes an intensified sensitivity to the how things are unfolding and an openness to the introduction of new, unforeseen strategies for intervening.

Chapter 3

Periods of Repose: Agency as a Deferral of Action

As modes of agency, flexibility and plasticity are better suited for the experience of flow in the world. Stubbornness and principled rigidity are better suited for a world of sovereign agency, fixed objects, and deterministic or efficient causality. Experiencing the occasional turbulence and periodic unpredictability of flow can sometimes frustrate agents, especially those who take the world to be more linearly predictable. As supple modes of agency, flexibility and plasticity should serve as aspirational compartments rather than plug-and-play shifts in agency. That is to say, the effectiveness of each agentic strategy is contingent upon integrating it into a plurality of potentials available in different circumstances. Pushing ourselves to integrate flexibility, plasticity, or repose into strategies of action requires work. If we experiment with these compartments (flexibility and plasticity), our political engagement may proceed along different lines than if they remain outside the range of available strategies, particularly when unexpected and creative outcomes upend expectations. As a sovereign, Oedipus' decision-making calculus is framed around certainties about his world. His effectiveness as a ruler is drawn from his ability to ascertain, quickly make the right decision, and then enforce that decision unwaveringly. Sometimes, certainly, this mode works, as it did in solving the riddle of the Sphinx. Sometimes it is a slow-burning disaster, as it was in killing the stranger at the crossroads. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus discovers that the framework in which he was working was flawed: everything he *knew* to be true about his own life was

a lie, and the decisions he had made based on that truth were now unfounded. By attempting to avoid his fate, he incurred it. Experiencing surprise can be disorienting for anyone, but it is doubly so for those who believe the world is governed by universal laws and is susceptible to human mastery, as Oedipus does.

As discussed in the first chapter, Creon adopts a similar approach to ruling based on the same belief in human mastery and the predictability of event chains. Sophocles demonstrates how the world is, at times, not susceptible to prediction. Everyone in the play is surprised when there is an unanticipated turn of events, but each character responds differently; those who most successfully adapt to rapidly changing conditions often avoid the most serious symptoms of disorientation from which characters like Oedipus (early on) and Creon suffer. The lesson is that the incorporation of an element of flexibility into one's approach to intervention may help avoid the dangers of the event by reminding us of how things 'flow' and that we sometimes have to work with flows.

The term flow suggests the insertion of an element of unpredictability into a sequence of events²⁰. A static or linear model reducible to the effects of efficient causality would, on the other hand, eliminate this element of unpredictability. An efficient model of causality may be the one Creon used to make and enforce decisions. However, such a model makes agents susceptible to the disorientation and anger that come when something startling or unexpected occurs. The experience of surprise reminds us that trying to purge the world of flows could eliminate our best options for responding

²⁰ For a related discussion of time and timeliness from which I am drawing, see Samuel Chambers' work in *Untimely Politics* (1996). In it (and much of the work that follows from it), he offers a notion of *untimeliness* or *le venir*--a future to come that cannot be anticipated in advance. His model stands in contrast with linear models of time.

to the world. Attempting to eliminate the variables that constitute a world of flow is not only impossible, it also may preclude those emergent options that best serve the agent. Such an attempt is especially far-fetched if we acknowledge that we, as subjects, are in a world of process. Subjects lack a stable position from which to stage interventions or make decisions—we often engage with moving targets from unfixed positions. As such, new possibilities for acting and becoming emerge if we imagine ourselves interacting with dynamic and fluctuating elements. In a world drawn from a synthesis of Lucretian atomism and Sophoclean tragedy, agency must be understood as intervening in the flow in order to encourage a particular set of outcomes over other, less desirable ones.

For example, Judith Butler presents a critique of medical procedures used to reduce or eliminate ambiguity in children's genitalia. Those who feel certain of the duality and permanence of gender make confident claims about the benefits of subjecting young children to a variety of medical procedures. Butler points out several potential problems arising from such decision-making, but one is that the decisions being made take for granted a rigid gender polarity that ought to be imposed on children whose bodies do not fall into the traditional categories of 'male' or 'female.' A post-structuralist analysis, like the one Butler outlines, may challenge the presuppositions that disfigure a body in order to make it fit one of those natural/biological categories. On the other hand, Butler recognizes the pressure parents are under when doctors tell them that their child is abnormal but can be made normal if action is taken quickly. The normative violence experienced by children and adolescents who find themselves at the margin (physically or otherwise) can be a motivating factor for making drastic decisions. Yet, choosing a

surgical solution at a very young age fails to do justice to the child, who cannot make the decision on her own, and will have to live with the result (which is unlikely to be a body exhibiting ‘normal’ attributes). Despite the pressure to act, the best way forward in these situations might be to not take action until the child grows older. The range of options available to the child may be greater if decisions are not made early on, and the tacit norms that govern that decision-making may undergo evolution in the intervening years.

It is possible to interpret flexibility and plasticity as passive modes of agency when what we need is an active set of political tactics. And it is true that strategies derived from them are often less direct and immediate, which makes them vulnerable to criticism when our preferred outcomes are not immediately achieved. In the Sophoclean plays, Jocasta exhibits a register of flexibility by ‘going with the flow’ regardless of the outcome. As such, her potential as a political figure is limited because her agency is restricted; she does not intervene in flows if she simply allows herself to go along with whatever happens. After all, agency requires some type of intervention that has an impact on an outcome, even if that intervention is smaller, less direct, or goes unnoticed at the time. Her approach, while important for outlining one layer of flexibility, is not sufficient for capturing the mode of agency derived from the combination of flexibility and plasticity. Jocasta flexibly molded herself to the circumstances at hand, but she did not take the step of also *giving form*, which is what makes plasticity the more active side of agency. The fact that we sometimes cannot know how events will actualize is not a reason to shy away from intervention. Instead, plasticity gives us prospects for being more effective when we do intervene, while at the same time limiting the degree of

ressentiment we feel about circumstances outside our control. The ability to bend flexibly or react plastically when one experiences a strong impulse to rigidify is the most challenging and active version of agency, even if it is sometimes interpreted as being weak or passive. Agency is thus an ambiguous capacity involving a combination of situational responsiveness and periodic intervention. The problem is that we often do not know which should be deployed in which situations. That's politics, or at least an integral part of it.

Time To Wait

Toward this end, and following the above example from Butler, the third form of agency, which complements the first two, is the ability to defer taking action for a period of time while things develop. Adopting a mode of repose before acting can sometimes be the most effective way to creatively respond to a new situation. As in the case of medical procedures above, *not* acting within the normal range of options might be the best way.

Withholding action contrasts with how political agency is often characterized: bold, quick, heroic, decisive action taken at a moment's notice. By the time the dust settles, as the story often goes, the decisive figure has solved the problem before his/her less decisive bystanders have realized what has happened. Those agents who are better suited to this type of impetuous and hasty action—before it's too late!—are sometimes described as the ideal agents for rapidly changing circumstances. This boldness is in contrast, say, to the messenger in *Antigone*, who moves slowly, indirectly, and with

heightened sensitivity. Emphasizing those moments when effective intervention is predicated on an ability to *withhold* taking action can allow for a period of incubation in which new ideas, options, outlooks, conditions, and resources may arise. At a minimum, such a period of repose gives the agent an opportunity to better evaluate the scenario and options while early trends develop. Rethinking agency as a concept that sometimes requires actively refraining from taking action for a period of time, even when conditions are developing quickly and there are calls for urgent intervention is necessary for responding to the contemporary condition.

To frame the conditions that make repose an important mode of agency, I turn to William Connolly's work on the experience of time in the late modern condition. Connolly argues that this condition can be characterized in part by the acceleration of certain zones of life (Connolly 2002, 143). According to Connolly, the experience of accelerated action requires adapting to this accelerated pace rather than attempting to slow things to a more manageable rate of speed. There are dangers associated with this acceleration—rapidly changing conditions sometimes encourage rash choices that result in major and unanticipated consequences. But, in addition to these dangers, Connolly points to the potential that accompanies such accelerations. These potentials are preferable to the 'reactive' drive to slow things down permanently. For him, zones of rapidity disclose democratic possibilities that are absent in a slow-moving world; an accelerated pace better illuminates time *as becoming*, as well as experimental techniques that increase the chances of deep pluralism. Our experience of time reveals unexpected turns of events that are irreducible to a "smooth narrative, sufficient set of rules, or tight

causal explanation” (Connolly 2002, 145). If Connolly is right about the risks stemming from reactive attempts to slow the world down, as well as about the underdevelopment of strategies for dealing with those risks, then the need for adapting to the contemporary condition is fundamental. Despite the immense pressure we feel to respond quickly as some processes speed up, I argue here that these periods of change are often the instances in which it is most important to *withhold* action. A period of repose acknowledges the experience/role of rapid change and attempts to temper the impulse to act immediately by favoring a brief pause for evaluating things more carefully.

Taking a pause before acting can sometimes keep the best strategies for intervening on the table when they are needed. More importantly, new strategies may crop up in the intervening period of repose. Creative approaches that had heretofore been unavailable or unacknowledged may bubble to the surface as conditions change or our thinking evolves. A pause intensifies the potential for this possibility while offering actors the chance to experiment with new tactics. Acting immediately can foreclose these options and leave agents with a narrowly restricted set of options for action. Despite the prepatent benefits of deferring action, it can feel counter-intuitive when there are pressures to do something about a developing situation. As conditions change, agents seeking to influence a set of outcomes may feel compelled to take action sooner rather than later because waiting may feel like ‘doing nothing.’ Attending to that pressure without giving in to it requires discipline and control. The agent is challenged to resist the pressure, to *wait* and see what options may be best, how to effectively pursue them, and how to time such a pursuit. In some ways, preserving a moment of repose is a matter of

practical utility. *Waiting* can be a useful tactic when it is deployed successfully. Learning to take the time to more carefully evaluate options may be easier if we understand the world to be in process, but this belief in becoming is not strictly necessary for integrating a moment of repose into one's arsenal of engaging the world. The compulsion to act before weighing options is greatest during periods of rapid change or recent crisis, when our 'instincts' are said to take over. But these are often the times when resisting this impulse to act is most important and it yields the best results.

For the purpose of further developing repose as a mode of agency, I retain the spirit of the Lucretian approach to materialism, but move through and beyond his interpretation of atomism and the *clinamen*. My reading remains grounded in a minor tradition that the atomists helped to launch, but it grows more sophisticated when the focus moves toward 'flows' in general, rather than specific primordia and their occasional collisions. I invoke Michel Serres' foundation of flows and vortices to support the development of and need for an original notion of repose as one strategy available to agents making political interventions.

What does it mean to withhold action in the face of a world marked by flow? What might 'repose' do for actors who deploy it as a strategy? In order to take it from the abstract to the concrete, I use an example of coercive surgery done to young children who have 'ambiguous' genital characteristics. I advocate deferring such a decision despite the immense pressure parents and medical personnel feel to quickly 'resolve' the ambiguity.

Finding Repose in a Tract of Fast Moving Water

In *The Birth of Physics* (2001), Michel Serres theorizes materialism beyond Epicurean and Lucretian atomic interaction and toward what he calls the vortex (or vortices), which he understands to be a model for understanding the passage of time. Vortices help us understand how change occurs in ways that are irreducible to linear or efficient models of causality. Modeling creative emergence and complexity by way of vortices gives us a more sophisticated way of understanding flows in the world.

For Serres, flows are everywhere and affect every aspect of existence. Nothing is outside flow, and this means everything has a finite lifespan. Everything, without exception, declines and deteriorates. However, the interaction between vortices in the flow produces the ever-present possibility of creative emergence. Even as vortices grow, gain momentum, deteriorate, and at some point disappear, their interactions with other vortices make simple entropy only a small part of the story. Intervening in the world and acting as an agent is tantamount to intervening in a flow of vortices. The Lucretian *clinamen*—that imperceptible atomic swerve that Lucretius understood to be the genetic principle of everything—now represents a slight deviation in the path of objects that flow. The shift in an object's trajectory is what creates the beginnings of a vortex, which is composed of elements swirling around each other. Something moving straight ahead (or even in an orbit) would never gather the force and momentum that a vortex gathers as the result of an imperceptible shift in course, and it would produce more consistent and predictable results. Serres explains:

The world is a multiplicity of flows, each inclined in relation to the others,

and every stream runs its slope. The ensemble of fluencies forms a cycle, by a generalized inclination to the global state of the materials of nature. These circulations are not circles, precisely on account of inclination. A circumference plus an angle, however small it may be, produces a spiral. (Serres 2001, 58)

Vortices are the genetic principles for the emergence and demise of everything. The vortex may persist, but it is never permanent. “[The vortex] is unstable and stable, fluctuating and in equilibrium, is order and disorder at once, it destroys ships at sea, it is the formation of things” (Serres 2001, 30). A spinning vortex can give an observer the illusion of stillness and stability when encountered; its internal movements may be supra-sensible. The appearance of stillness can be deceiving, depending on the pace and stability of the vortex, but Serres assures us that all things are in motion. Detecting motion may require a closer look or a longer time frame.

For Serres, the flow of vortices is not a unified or totalizing space of movement. Rather, the multiplicity of flows (in proximity to one another) affects the outcome of events. Interfering with the spin or trajectory of one vortex, for instance, also affects those vortices around it. A small change in trajectory at an early stage may result in a dramatic change over time. Our interventions in one space will impact multiple other vortices, usually in ways that are difficult to predict. By acknowledging the interrelatedness of vortices in the flow, we can more easily understand the way our actions have potentially far-reaching effects. Serres notes that while nothing is outside the flow (sitting still somewhere, for example), the flow is not a universal field. It is a highly differentiated and dynamic process of slow or fast emergence. He understands it as a genetic principle for both the emergence of the new and the demise of the actual.

Intermingling vortices are responsible for everything we encounter; they are also responsible for the emergence and experience of *newness*. What we understand as new is a reconfiguration of already-existing aspects of pre-existing vortices, encountered in a new way. Each vortex eventually breaks down, and others emerge in its place. Flow is the only permanent ‘feature’ of Serresian world.

The world, objects, bodies, my very soul are, at the moment of their birth, in decline. This means, in the everyday sense, that they are mortal and bound for destruction. It also means that they form and arise. Nature declines and this is its act of birth. And its stability. (Serres 2001, 34)

If we accept this flow-based interpretation, then taking a pause before intervening is not the equivalent of staying still, *per se*. Staying still would mean somehow being outside the flow or fighting the flow until one is motion-less. Both strategies are impossible; nothing stays still. Rather, a period of repose indicates a certain mode of traveling with the flow for a certain duration. The attempt to be stationary in a world of flow takes extreme effort (as we will see). Even those things that appear to be permanent and stationary in relation to the flow are actually moving at a slow pace, participating in cosmic flows without our being able to witness that participation. The solar system is not permanent and the temperature of the sun’s heat in combination with the planetary differentiation ensures this, even if this rate of change is sometimes unnoticeable to the unaided senses.

To illustrate what he means by the abstract notion of motion appearing as stillness, Serres offers two primary metaphors: that of a person swimming across a tract of fast moving water, and that of a spinning top. In both cases, motion is primary, even

when things appear to be at rest. When intervening in the river or the spin of the top, the agent who intends to stop the flow or extend the spin indefinitely will be disappointed with the results. The river keeps flowing and the top will not remain vertical.

The spinning top illustrates the way objects that appear to be at rest are actually in motion: as it spins around its axis, it appears to be at rest or moving very slowly. “It is in movement, this is certain, yet it is stable” (Serres 2001, 28). As its rotation slows, the top becomes increasingly unstable. Finally, it falls out of its spin and topples. Its motion produces stability until it runs its course. It then dissipates and (using Serres’ analogy) other ‘tops’ start spinning. The initial appearance of stillness is an illusion; a closer look reveals the key to the top’s stability is its high rate of speed.

A moving tract of water also demonstrates the flow of things that appear to be still. From certain vantage points, the water’s movement is plain to see. But from other perspectives, the river appears to be at rest (at a distance, for instance). And, if one were floating in the river, objects floating alongside would appear to be at rest as they moved at a similar rate of speed, like two trains traveling on parallel tracks in the same direction. Obstacles down river will encounter us—or we will encounter them—and we will need to navigate around elements that are participating in the flow at various rates of velocity. A small change in trajectory may substantially change where one ends up downstream, while a struggle to travel upstream against a strong current will expend significant energy, frustrate the agent, and may not get her agent closer to her destination.

This notion of vortices can inform a certain sense of the subject, politics, and agency in a helpful way. The image of multiple vortices, themselves participating in

larger vortices, points to the complex multiplicity of relations that contribute to the emergence of the new, as well as the often complicated nature of intervening in certain vortices to achieve an objective. If we think of local orders and even subjects as spinning tops flowing down a tract of water, a schema of available options come to mind that are different than motionless beings on dry land making sovereign decisions. Regimes, technologies, campaign strategies, party figureheads, legal frameworks, cultural paradigms, demographic breakdowns, geopolitical boundaries, ideologies, social mores, climates, ideologies, religious claims, norms, and conceptions of subjectivity are not static things that can be manipulated over time in consistently predictable ways. Instead, they flow and interact, complicating the way we strategize our roles among them. Distinctions between them are not clear-cut. They overlap. Interacting with one will inevitably have an impact on others, often in ways we cannot predict in advance. Broadening our sensitivity to those elements around us that appear to be moving too slowly or too rapidly may encourage more effective tactics for achieving our goals in a world in process. It also might help us alter our goals.

Our approach to politics and philosophy may benefit from positing a world of flow. When we experience the way the world flows (from time to time), it seems ineffectual to pursue a schema of political options based exclusively on a world of solid *things*. By making *flows* primary rather than solids, a different terrain of political approaches becomes available. For Serres, one cannot isolate an arena of flow from another of solidity. The absence of flow in any arena is an illusion, particularly when the timeframe adopted is expanded. “Such phenomena discerned in the entrails of the subject

are no different from those which constitute the world. Coherence is invariable from one structure to another, psychology and metaphysics.” (Serres 2001, 32) The whole operation, from subjects to metaphysics, is thought of as flowing, intersecting vortices.

This metaphysical understanding from Serres constitutes the frame for describing the advantages of repose as a political option. As agents, we intervene in events as if we were intervening in the spin of the top or its trajectory as it travels in moving water. As agents, we do not play a deciding role in the outcome of events, because we are only one element among the many that participate in the flow. Our interventions may have an influence, but that influence is more modest and less predictable than that presented in a metaphysic marked by universal laws and human mastery. I am neither describing complete free will by sovereign agents nor deterministic conceptions of fate that eliminate agency. Rather, a world of flow correlates with *mediated* agency,²¹ in which the agent is one component in a complex network of variations.

The intersection of mediated agency informs the metaphysics of flow sketched above, and vice versa. The two models are not reducible to one another, but they are linked. Repose is helpful for making interventions more sensitive and effective in a world of flow because it allows agents to get a closer look at rapidly developing trajectories. And the experience of flow intensifies the need for a period of repose in order to avoid the *ressentiment* that sometimes accompanies the experience of change over time.

Modest expectations may follow from what would appear to be modest

²¹ For more on notions of mediated agency, see Jane Bennett’s work on minor agency or mediated agency, in which the agent participates in an assemblage of components. For Bennett, the human agent is one of several different entities that possesses some form of agency, and events unfold as a result of the combination of all of these different ‘agents’. See Bennett’s discussion of agency in both *Vibrant Matter* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

interventions. In a world of flows, agents may find themselves focusing on indirect staging: periods of deliberate patience; intensified sensitivity and awareness to milieus and virtual forces just beneath the surface of perception; contingency and contingency plans (and even those must remain flexible); multiple layers of time producing multiple goal sets for near- and long-term objectives.

Everything Flows (Especially Metal)

Rather than defending the claim that *even metal* has a vital impulse or material activity, Deleuze and Guattari argue that there is, in fact, no better example of matter's vitality: "metal and metallurgy imposed upon and raised to consciousness something that is only hidden or buried in the other matters and operations" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 410; Cf: Bennett 2010). Artisans of metallurgy must be attentive to the vitality of matter in order to produce their pieces. Metal may appear to be lifeless and static, but closer engagement reveals an active, vibrant, fluctuating substance constantly on its way to becoming something else. As it interacts with changing conditions—temperature, water, surrounding elements, other metals—it changes form and content at different rates. A skilled metallurgist traces the changes and intervenes at particular points to produce the desired object (which lasts for a period of time). Exploring the vitality of metal calls attention to the way material things are in a state of formation even when they appear to be the picture of permanence.

The rate at which those objects are becoming something other than what they are

varies depending on a host of variables, but the appearance of permanence in any object is merely an appearance. Even metal, which may appear hardened and lifeless, buzzes with activity on the micro-level. Oxidation as a result of water changes the composition of certain metals at various degrees of rapidity. Electrons zip around nuclei at the atomic level, never coming to rest. Molecules interact with other molecular structures in ways that influence the overall character of the metal as we encounter it. And changes in outside conditions play a dramatic role in the outcome and pace of these transformations. The materiality of the metal is in flux. Metal is always becoming something other than what it is. By introducing heat, pressure, or water, the metallurgist intervenes in a metallic process of becoming; atoms are rearranged en masse at a micro-scale. The artisan has to be attentive to the nature of the material even as it undergoes these transformations, in order to encourage the emergence of a particular form. The interaction is a process of negotiation, in which the craftsperson must ‘listen’ to the metal in order to remake it. The intensive qualities, beneath the surface, express themselves in ways that impact the outcome.

In whatever form we find the metal, it is on its way to another form. It does not abide by a hylomorphic model’s universal laws and mechanics. Rather, metal exists as a complex interaction between internal/external attributes and the way certain compositions express those attributes in a particular context. Metal is not merely the particular configuration of atoms at a particular time—because that configuration will change over time—nor is it merely the characteristics expressed by metal at a particular time—because those, too, are dynamic. The “vague essence of matter” (Deleuze and Guattari

1987, 407) is an in-between term, neither form nor content, that persists over time even as it is transformed into something else. Essences should not be understood as configuration, form, or even a strict combination of the two. Instead, essences involve a fuzzy and vague overlapping of the two without being reducible to either. “We have seen that these vague essences are as distinct from formed things as they are from formal essences. They constitute fuzzy aggregates” (Ibid.).

Changes in configuration or form can be difficult to observe if the pace of transformation is significantly different from the way we experience time’s passage on a day-to-day basis. Bennett (2010) uses the example of a lightning bolt or a computer processor; the speed at which transformation occurs is too rapid for our unaided sensory organs. The slow but persistent erosion of a mountain or the breakdown of stones by waves, on the other hand, are processes that move too slowly for us to witness in real time. We may be tempted to dismiss the vibrancy beneath the surface and treat these things as static objects (even if we intellectually acknowledge this not to be the case).

Bennett summarizes Deleuze and Guattari’s argument thus:

metal “conducts” (ushers) itself through a series of self-transformations, which is not a sequential movement from one fixed point to another, but a tumbling of continuous variations with fuzzy borders...this tumbling is a function not only of the actions applied to the metal *by* metallurgists but of the protean activeness of the metal itself. (Bennett 2010, 59)

The confluence of artisan, milieu, and myriad various elements of metal comprises the metal as we encounter it. Each aspect contributes to the overall outcome of the processes without being a sole deciding factor. The metallurgist is not in control of the outcome, but she becomes more effective if she pays close attention to these vibrant factors.

By taking the model of flow from Lucretius and Serres as primary, universal laws and deterministic models are less applicable to the world around us and less able to predict the creative emergence of the new. “It would be useless to say that metallurgy is a science because it discovers constant laws, for example, the melting point of a metal at all times and in all places” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 405). It does do the latter, but the metallurgist is sensitive to the specific characteristics of the material, and follows it as it undergoes transformation. The process—the relationship between the artisan, the metal, and the surrounding conditions—is an art rather than a science. The corollary to this claim is that strict adherence to a set of laws derived from a scientific model will prevent the metallurgist from intervening effectively in the creation of the desired object.²²

A mediated model of agency is exemplified by metallurgy because the metallurgist isn’t the only actant involved in making something out of metal. She and the metal participate in a configuration that includes several other components, a specific milieu, and a temporal moment. Each component plays a role in the process. Each component interacts with the other components, and the configurations themselves interact with one another. Serres calls this a vortex; Deleuze and Guattari call it an assemblage, which they describe as “a constellation of singularities and traits deduced from the [continuous] flow—*selected organized, stratified*—in such a way as to converge (consistently) artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable *invention*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 406; emphasis mine).

²² Science plays a crucial role in metalworking, and as our knowledge of metal has developed, our ability to work with metal has improved. The point I take from Deleuze and Guattari is that the complexity of the metal and processes of working with it should not be understood solely in scientific terms based on a hylomorphic mode.

As the metallurgist approaches the task at hand, she must make the flow manageable, which requires siphoning off a small portion of the surrounding milieu. A particular collection of singularities (the assemblage) is explored in relation to others (the milieu). It is impossible to pay close attention to each component, since an ever-widening scope of components play a role. The artisan must limit the elements she takes into consideration throughout the process, even if other factors may potentially influence the outcome. Neither the metal nor the artisan is thus in ‘control’ of the process or the outcome, but Deleuze and Guattari seem to favor those artists who are especially sensitive to the way matter responds, who err on the side of subtle modifications and creative interventions. I argue that one of the subtle options available to the metallurgist is the choice to wait for a moment in order to get a better idea of the assemblage’s trajectory. In order to obtain the proper consistency of a particular piece of metal, the artisan must sometimes let the metal cool for a moment. Other times, she must leave the metal in the flame a bit longer.

The artisanal approach to metalworking provides a model for human agency in a world of flow more generally. If everything is in slow or rapid process, if we as agents are not in complete control of this process, interventions must be undertaken with this understanding in mind. Conceiving of ourselves as actors participating with a number of other flowing actors presents us with a different range of options than a vision of the world as static or describable by linear causality.

This thumbnail sketch of flow as I’ve gathered it now involves:

- an infinite number of primordia falling in laminar flow, until a swerve causes an

unexpected collision with proximate atoms;

- a great number of vortices spinning with varying degrees of stability, interacting with one other, yielding results that cannot be closely predicted in advance;
- a series of rivers that flow;
- an atomic vitality beneath the surface of those materials that appear most lifeless and still (metal), which is the source of the transformation that is inevitably occurring at various rates (some perceptible, others imperceptible).

Where does this sketch leave political engagement? As agents participating in this flow, what can we draw upon to intervene? How do we get a sense of *when* to intervene? If several aspects of the world are not reducible to efficient causality or discernable physical rules, our strategies for intervening cannot be predicated on that world. Rather, a new set of tactics must be developed that is more compatible with the flow of the world. As Sophocles reminds us, it is tempting to get frustrated when the course of events does not yield to our wishes and a series of surprises foils our plans. Moreover, as the concepts of plasticity and virtuality remind us, we are not deterministic beings plodding along toward an end point. Embracing this modified concept of flow helps address those two concerns while informing the way we can intervene more sensitively and efficaciously. Seeing the world as flow encourages us to perceive when it unfolds in unexpected ways. When we do this, we may pursue the flexibility to work on ourselves from time to time (plasticity). Flow invites us to continually revise our participation in the social and political environments and networks that remain in motion. We are reminded not to give up when our efforts appear ineffectual at accomplishing what we intend; they had an

effect, but we are not masterful agents who can simply will reliable outcomes. Lastly, flow better equips us to recognize the emergence of local orders that stabilize—for a time, like a top—and creatively intervene to encourage a particular sensibility or enact an agenda. We can devote efforts to encouraging or discouraging local structures as they surge (or dribble) into being. “In choosing how to act, one chooses how to intervene in this decline, how to reinforce a recurrent structure or to accelerate the dissolution of another, and thereby how to construct a time of one’s own in the balance between equilibrium and disequilibrium.” (Webb 2006, 133) Such an engagement is not as direct as some other forms, but there are advantages to understanding our role in this light.

A Period of Repose

Friedrich Nietzsche is often read as a theorist of the strong over the weak, a claim that is often interpreted as favoring the decisive, direct, and bold agent over the less direct agent of careful engagement or periodic inaction. There is evidence to support this. However, there are also moments where Nietzsche makes a case for restraint rather than impulsive action. Indeed, at his best, he links ‘strength’ and ‘nobility’ to the capacity to hesitate and allow creative energies to emerge. Only *after* these periods of inaction does the noble actor intervene. These places throughout Nietzsche’s work resonate with a Lucretian view of materialism, even if other passages do not. By examining those instances where Nietzsche prioritizes deliberate inaction over immediate action, the case for restraint in a world that is becoming can be extended and more widely applied to a

world of flows.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006), specifically, Nietzsche commends the man of struggle and decisiveness in several different places. When he speaks of war and warriors, he favors struggle over work (Nietzsche 2006, 33), and he is critical of agents who cannot act or who believe that they are powerless. But, in other places, he admires the agent who chooses *not* to act when action is either useless or counterproductive, particularly in a world marked by occasional instability. It seems clear that Nietzsche does not favor one strategy over the other in every instance; each case must be judged independently and from a specific perspective. In a section that examines the stability of footbridges over water in the winter, Zarathustra argues that the stillness and stability of the winter is an illusion, exposed by the “thaw wind.” His interlocutor (whom he refers to as a “dummy”) admits that the river itself is in flux, but insists that “Over the river everything is firm, all the values of things, the bridges, concepts, all ‘good’ and ‘evil’ — all of this is *firm!*” Zarathustra retorts “‘Basically everything stands still’ — that is a real winter doctrine, a good thing for sterile times, a good comfort for hibernators and stove huggers...but *against this* preaches the thaw wind!” The wind destroys the footbridges and undermines their stability, “is everything not *now in flux?*” (Nietzsche 2006, 161). Fluctuations in everything indicate a lifespan for each local order; it forms the basis for Nietzsche’s skepticism of permanent, universal, objective claims.

Like Lucretian primordia or Serres’ vortices, to Nietzsche, “Everything of today — it is falling, it is failing” (Nietzsche 2006, 168). Zarathustra’s agency is to push whatever is falling (Ibid.) and in doing so, to change its course. Playing a minor role in

changing the trajectory of whatever may be falling is congruent with the interpretation of mediated agency I have in mind. Nietzsche's advice to Zarathustra's "enemies and to everything that spits and spews: 'Beware of spitting *against* the wind!'" (76). As agents, we are integrated into the flow of the world around us whether we acknowledge it or not. We are one small element in the flow around us, and we cannot control or reverse the flow. As in Serres' river metaphor, we can navigate if we recognize ourselves within the flow: "I still drift on uncertain seas; accident flatters me with its smooth tongue, and though I look forward and backward, I still see no end" (Nietzsche 2006, 130).

Nietzsche challenges the actor to adapt to a changing world without feeling resentful about his or her inability to master it. The experience of transformation can be explicit and rapid (e.g. geopolitics immediately after September 11, 2001) or slow and gradual (as with some large scale global eco-phenomena). There is flow in the occasional but violent upheaval of natural disasters, for instance, but there is also flow in the tiny trickle of water or in the transvaluation of an ethic. Small transformations may go unnoticed, even if they influence the outcome of events in significant ways. Nietzsche encourages a heightened sensitivity to these flows: "From the future come winds with secretive wingbeats; good tidings are issued to *delicate* ears" (Nietzsche 2006, 58). Both "great and little streams" flow (260) but it is easy to miss the flow of the very small or the very large. And when agents are caught up in the flow and the instinct is to fight against it rather than work with it, Nietzsche challenges the 'hero' to resist this urge:

With his arm laid across his head—thus the hero should rest, thus too he should overcome even his resting.

But precisely for the hero beauty is the most difficult of all things. Beauty is not be wrested by any violent willing.

A little more, a little less: right here this means much, here this means the most.

To stand with muscles relaxed and with an unharnessed will: this is most difficult for all of you sublime ones!

When power becomes gracious and descends into view: beauty I call such descending. (92)

He relaxes when others are scrambling, which can be more difficult than joining them. Withholding action is an act of self-discipline. It takes work. Nietzsche does not treat this mode of agency as a decision that one can simply take up at will. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1990), he understands it as an aspiration:

Learning to see—habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgment, to investigate and comprehend the individual case in all its aspects. [The ability]...not to react immediately to stimulus, but to have the restraining, stock-taking instincts in one's control. (Nietzsche 1990, 76; emphasis mine)

A deliberate pause, even as instincts are insisting on immediate action before creative juices have time to ferment. The need for patience and repose is heightened in the contemporary condition, when our experience of flow occasionally threatens to overwhelm us. What can be gained by reserving this moment? Serres believes that by taking this moment of repose, one creates “a readiness for a sense of emergence from which novelty will come” (Webb 2006, 134). Nietzsche does, too. In his analysis of the Gift-Giving Virtue (via Zarathustra), he speaks to those who have a need to bestow gifts on others. The gift givers receive something in the act of gift giving, though it may not be clear what it is, exactly. Though Zarathustra explains gift giving as a virtue, he also notes the dangers that accompany it: “When your heart flows broad and full like a river, a blessing and a danger to adjacent dwellers: there is the origin of your virtue.” Risks are

involved when the orthodox framework is challenged, and Zarathustra clarifies that gift giving is a new good and evil, “a new, deep rushing and the voice of a new Spring!” Then, he grows quiet and pauses for a period of time. When he speaks again to his disciples, “his voice had transformed” (Nietzsche 2006, 57). The change is not simply a matter of time passing. A pause holds the potential for something new and creative to emerge; the inflow of experience offers us something to process. During this time of hesitation, you self-consciously seek to exacerbate the flow of unfamiliar experiences, experiences that just may turn out to be relevant. You allow them to digest themselves as they will within you. And then you find out what pours forth. Sometimes the gift that flows out enhances your responsiveness, energy and intelligence. You now become a carrier of the gift-giving virtue.

A period of repose makes that transformation more likely and more intensive. Repose extends the possibility of the emergence of creative energies, new ideas, and changing circumstances. When one then acts after a pause, the outflow is something other than what it would have been absent the period of repose. An actor who experiments with a heightened sensitivity to the inflows and the moments of repose that may accompany them may have a greater potential for innovative and imaginative modes of outflow.

The disadvantage of skipping this crucial step is not simply that things are missed or options foreclosed; it is that we will miss the chance to reframe how we understand choices, how we sit in relation to choices, and what the conditions of choice-making are. Humans are experiments, but as experiments, noble actors are the ones that actively experiment in the world. A self-reflective subject may invite transformations that occur

from experiments of/with the self. Humans are a creative process, Nietzsche believes, and this is partially what he means when describes traveling toward the overman. He does not mean that we must *be* something different that we are; he means that we must *become*. A sequence of inflow, repose, and outflow expands and transforms possibilities for engaging in the world as experimental actors in process.

A period of repose also helps insulate the agent from the threat of *ressentiment*. Coping with an inability to turn back time or control the flow of events is easier when agency is understood as participation in a world of flow. And, information gained during a moment of repose from heightened sensitivity to the course of events may yield valuable information or new creative energies that were hitherto unavailable (if we listen carefully): “Thoughts that come on the feet of doves steer the world” (Nietzsche 2006, 117). We might miss them, if we are not paying close attention.

Mitigating *ressentiment* does not, however, mean helplessly and hopelessly embracing everything that happens. As Jocasta demonstrated in *Oedipus Rex*, flexibly going with the flow is insufficient for engaging the world. But acknowledging that everything flows over time can open up and redirect strategies for political agency, which may start with but will surely extend beyond a moment of repose. It means “welcoming flows that surround us and maintaining balance within them. This may involve giving way, or may involve...hard work” (Webb 2006, 134). Our interventions in the flow—which may require great effort—target particular tracts, vortices, and orders, rather than stable objects at rest. Nietzsche’s interpretation is positioned in the space between determination and free will. He criticizes the “soothsayers and astrologers” (Nietzsche

2006, 161) because they believe that everything is fate thus cannot be changed by us. But, he also criticizes those who express their skepticism of the soothsayers by arguing that “Everything is freedom!” (Ibid.). Working within a flow of time and space involves a middle ground between these extremes.

Sanctioning Ambiguity: Intersex and Repose

In order to further explore the value of a moment of repose, it is helpful to locate and explore an instance when delaying action may preserve important options and avoid catastrophe. I take up and extend Judith Butler’s analysis of sex reassignment in *Undoing Gender* (2004) as it relates to “doing justice to someone” (57). She connects this analysis to her larger project of exploring conditions of intelligibility, particularly as they intersect with gendered bodies. The recognizability of a gendered body is one criterion for intelligibility, Butler argues, and intelligibility is an important component of being human (Butler 2004, 58). Butler questions parents’ decision (and doctors’ recommendations) to assign a ‘clear’ sexuality to young children via medical procedures, while also recognizing the strength and omnipresence of norms that restrict intelligibility to gendered bodies. Using that stance as a framing mechanism and a point of departure, I argue that interrogating the temptation to eliminate gender ambiguity in young bodies through medical procedures is one example of a period of repose. It opens the door to exploring other alternatives and finding an effective strategy for “doing justice to someone” (a point that is even more salient in a world that flows). To make this

argument, I trace Butler's work on one subject, David Reimer, who finds 'himself' at the intersection of a debate over the nature of gender as it relates to 'his' body.

David was not born with 'ambiguous' genitalia or an anomalous chromosomal makeup. He was born a boy with XY chromosomes. When he was eight months old, he underwent a surgical procedure to rectify phimosis, a condition that makes it difficult to urinate. The medical staff, who were unfamiliar with the machine being used for the procedure, accidentally burned and severed a portion of David's penis. His parents were "unclear how to proceed" (Butler 2004, 59). One year later, they started exploring gender reassignment surgery after hearing Dr. John Money discuss its benefits on television. They contacted Money and he invited them to Johns Hopkins University Hospital for an examination of David. His "strong recommendation" was for David to be raised as a girl; Money believed that "if a child underwent surgery and started socialization as a gender different from the one originally assigned at birth, the child could develop normally, adapt perfectly well to the new gender, and live a happy life." David's parents agreed, and David underwent reassignment surgery. His testicles were removed and the doctors "made some preliminary preparation for surgery to create a vagina, but decided to wait until Brenda, the newly named child, was older to complete the task" (Butler 2004, 59).

Under careful and ongoing observation by family and an extensive medical staff, Brenda was raised as a girl over the next several years. Starting at around the age of eight, Brenda's parents (and the medical staff monitoring her) noticed changes that indicated the gender reassignment process had not been completely 'successful.' She became interested in toys traditionally associated with boys—machine guns and trucks—

and she preferred to stand when she urinated. Money recommended estrogen therapy and a surgery to create a 'real' vagina, but Brenda refused. Butler recounts the strategies used to convince Brenda to undergo additional surgery and hormone therapy:

Money had her view sexually graphic pictures of vaginas. Money even went so far as to show Brenda pictures of women giving birth, holding out the promise that Brenda might be able to give birth if she acquired a vagina...she and her brother were required to perform mock coital exercises with one another, on command. (Butler 2004, 60)

After a separate team of doctors determined that a mistake had been made in the sex reassignment, a second opinion was solicited from Milton Diamond, "a sex researcher who believes in the hormonal basis of gender identity and who has been battling Money for several years." Diamond and his team offered Brenda the option of living life as a boy, which she accepted. Her breasts were removed and a phallus was surgically constructed when he was 15 or 16, though he did not have the ability to ejaculate and he urinated from its base (Butler 2004, 60).

Butler points out that both Money and Diamond use David's case as evidence for their respective positions on gender and the body, if not as a success story for their particular prognoses. While David was living as Brenda, Money published that she was "developing normally and happily" as a girl just as her brother was as a boy (61). He used this specious observation as evidence of a "gender identity gate" that remains open at a birth for "something over a year after birth" (Money and Green, quoted in Butler 2004, 61). Researchers used the case as further evidence of the cultural malleability of gendered norms; masculine and feminine can and do change over time. Diamond, on the other hand, concluded that Brenda's choice to 'become a boy' again stemmed from a deep-

seeded and originary sense of gender attached to the genitalia with which he was born or to corollary hormonal secretions, etc. For Diamond, Brenda's choice to become David (a 'man') provides evidence of an "essential gender core, one that is tied in some irreversible way to anatomy and to a deterministic sense of biology" (Butler 2004, 62). Both used the same case to solidify their opposing and uncompromising positions.

In contradistinction with both, Cheryl Chase, who was director of the Intersexed Society of North America, believes that while "a child should be given a sex assignment for the purposes of establishing a stable social identity," "it does not follow that society should engage in coercive surgery to remake the body in the social image of that gender" (Butler 2004, 63). An adult may choose to change genders or to undergo medical procedures that transform her/his body, but making this decision on behalf of a child is unfair to the child and is unlikely to benefit her/him in the short- or long-term. Butler is quick to point out that 'gender' is a complicated and dynamic set of ideas and norms involved in complex relations with one's body or anatomy. It cannot and should not be reduced to one of these two diametrically opposed camps based on a simple chromosomal test or physical examination. And, the pressure on parents to make their child 'normal' so as to avoid social challenges is immense, as is the anxiety experienced when making such important decisions for the very young. But despite the best intentions, Butler notes that normalcy is not usually what is achieved by opting for these surgical procedures. "Most astonishing, in a way, is the mutilated state that these bodies are left in, mutilations performed and then paradoxically rationalized in the name of 'looking normal,' the rationale used by medical practitioners to justify these surgeries"

(Butler 2004, 63). There are risks involved with this type of surgery. The procedures often threaten sexual function and present numerous challenges to the child as they become aware of the social norms governing gender and bodies. Perhaps this is why the intersex movement's position has migrated to a position distinct from those of both Diamond and Money. Rather than figuring out which binary pole a gendered body can be medically pushed toward, the intersex movement is trying "to imagine a world in which individuals with mixed genital attributes might be accepted and loved without having to transform them into a more socially coherent or normative version of gender" (Butler 2004, 64-5).

In opposition to this imagined world, much of the medical community has upheld a clearly defined two-gender model. The existence of a significant number of people with mixed genital attributes does not challenge this model, it seems. Instead, this population only serves to reinforce the need to deploy medical technologies meant to eliminate these 'anomalies' at an age at which they cannot consent and in spite of the serious risks involved. This framework is unacceptable to Casey:

the intersex movement has sought to question why society maintains the ideal of gender dimorphism when a significant percentage of children are chromosomally various, and a continuum exists between male and female that suggests the arbitrariness and falsity of the gender dimorphism as a prerequisite of human development. There are humans, in other words, who live and breathe in the interstices of this binary relation, showing that it is not exhaustive; it is not necessary. (Butler 2004, 65)

It is, however, a powerful and persistent notion that threatens to do normative violence to those who do not conform to this binary operation of gender.

For a different example that also illuminates some of the stubborn complexities

that surround determining one's gender, I turn to the case of Caster Semenya, a South African middle-distance runner. Just before the World Championships in Berlin in 2009, Semenya was accused of illegitimately competing in women's track events. "Her masculine appearance had raised concerns and complaints to the International Association of Athletics Federations," which is the association with jurisdiction over such matters (Curley 2012). If Semenya had too many male characteristics, or too few female ones, she would have an unfair advantage over her (ostensibly) female competitors.

These accusations were not the first of their kind. There is a long history of misidentifying genders for athletic competition, particularly in Olympic Games. Tests have varied from "gynecological exam, blood test, chromosome test" (Hurst 2009) but none have yielded satisfactory results. Physical examinations can yield inconclusive results, as can chromosome tests. A new standard was needed to determine whether Semenya was eligible to compete as a woman.

In the end, the International Olympic Committee drafted and enforced a set of regulations for the 2012 Olympic Games in London. However, these regulations were not tantamount to declaring Semenya a man or a woman. In fact,

Nothing in these regulations is intended to make any determination of sex. Instead, [they] are designed to identify circumstances in which a particular athlete will be eligible (by reason of hormonal characteristic) to participate in the 2012 OG Competitions in the female category. (IOC 2012, 1)

If she is found to be ineligible, she may, according to the IOC, compete as a male (despite the 'fact' that she is a woman). The primary criterion for competing as a woman in the Olympics is not 'being' a woman; it is producing testosterone at or below a level

determined to be fair by the IOC. Such a determination is necessary because “Human biology...allows for forms of intermediate levels between the conventional categories of male and female, sometimes referred to as intersex” (IOC 2012, 1).

The ‘facts’ about Semenya’s biology and physical makeup are largely based on speculation and anonymous reports, and the goal of this discussion is not to make a determination about her gender. According to the *Daily Telegraph* in Australia, Semenya has no womb or ovaries, and she may have undescended testes, which would result in higher levels of testosterone (Hurst 2009). When asked about the tests she was required to undergo to determine her gender, Semenya responded, “I see it all as a joke, it doesn’t upset me. God made me the way I am and I accept myself. I am who I am and I’m proud of myself. I don’t want to talk about the tests—I’m not even thinking about them” (Hurst 2009).

Rather than weighing in on either side of the diametrically framed debate that Money and Diamond (and others) have framed, Butler refuses the terms of the debate itself. Although the methods and prognoses deviate, both positions are contingent upon a clearly defined two-gender cultural system in which the gender that one *should* live can be discovered and then enacted. Gender ambiguity is a non-starter because it leaves open the question of what gender someone *is*, at least for the time being. But this is precisely the moment I want to preserve. As Butler argues, the phobia of gender ambiguity is an unnecessary one, and the best option may often be to simply *wait* until the person can make his or her own decision regarding possible medical procedures. Money *knows* that a woman can be surgically constructed and socialized to be normal. Diamond *knows* that

the gender of a person is determined by which chromosomes they were born and ought to be made to match that identity. Neither leave room for the middle, and neither can accept a period of ambiguity while the child develops. Immediate action *must* be taken, they argue. When Chase was asked if “she agrees with Diamond’s recommendations on intersexual surgery,” she replied: “They can’t conceive of leaving someone alone” (Butler 2004, 64). ‘Leaving someone alone,’ for a period, may preserve options that disappear when early-age surgery is involved. Corrective medical efforts “not only violate the child but lend support to the idea that gender has to be borne out in singular and normative ways at the level of anatomy. Gender is a different sort of identity, and its relation to anatomy is complex” (Butler 2004, 63). Deliberately choosing *not* to act, despite the immense pressure and anxiety circulating in medical and parental communities, may be the best way to ‘do justice’ to a child while slowly eroding the foundations of the norms that enforce a two-gender system.

Undergoing coerced, disfiguring surgery at an age when the ramifications cannot be processed does not preclude the normative violence visited upon those gendered bodies that find themselves living outside the dimorphic norm. The goal, as Butler reminds us, is not to discover and impose one’s ‘true’ gender, even if that were possible. The larger goal is to do justice to someone else. Doing justice requires heightened sensitivity to the way norms sanction bodies, genders, and lived experiences. It also requires a political moment. Conditions of intelligibility may hinge on some notion of gender (at least for the moment), but this normative fact does not justify pursuing radical medical solutions for eliminating the ambiguity marking a child’s genitalia.

Researchers reviewing the case after the fact have analyzed previously unpublished interviews with David. He indicates that he always believed himself to be a boy, even when he was living as Brenda. He took note of indicators that marked him as male and concluded he was a boy, even if he struggled to admit it under the circumstances. His self-description clarifies his gender as male, and Butler wants to honor his self-identification even as she complicates it:

we have a description of a self that takes place in a language that is already going on, that is already saturated with norms, that predisposes us as we seek to speak of ourselves. Moreover, we have words that are delivered in the context of an interview, an interview which is part of the long and intrusive observational process that has accompanied Brenda's formation from the start. (Butler 2004, 69)

It is not a matter of whether David is being 'truthful' per se (what would it mean to be untruthful in this instance?). Rather, Butler points out that the words David speaks emerge in a world brimming with powerful gender norms (indeed, they emerge *because* of those norms); they cannot be evaluated in a vacuum, isolated from those norms. A political moment is required to work toward justice in this instance. The standards for human recognizability pressure David to *be* a boy (or a girl) in order to be intelligible in a world defined by binary gender norms. Severe ambiguity would inhibit his ability to be recognized as human, to *read* as human. Butler notes that the voice that speaks in those interviews is: produced and enabled by norms of intelligibility; restricted by those same norms; and marked as outside those norms, subject to the sanctions enforced on the margins. David's words express a set of expectations that he has for himself, even as he has inherited those expectations from the world in which he found himself (broad shoulders, climbing trees, playing with machine guns, etc.). Norms involve expectations,

and expectations are partially constitutive of David as we find him in the interviews (just as they are constitutive of all of us), even if he is unaware of this fact (Butler 2004, 69). The very *criteria* David uses to come to the conclusion that he is a boy are already produced by, and mired in, the gendered societal norms he observes, is taught, and inform the judgments of medical personnel. If those norms were somehow transformed, the conclusions available to David—and them—might be different, as would the grounds for drawing those conclusions.

If this is the case, the question of a *true, core, or cultural* notion of gender curls up on itself. Butler does not argue a third and definitive theory of gender that will resolve whether or not David should have become Brenda or Brenda should have become David. A solution does not immediately present itself.

I do not know how to judge that question here, and I am not sure it can be mine to judge. Does justice demand that I decide? *Or does justice demand that I wait to decide, that I practice a certain deferral in the face of a situation in which too many have rushed to judgment? Might it not be useful, important, even just, to consider a few matters before we decide, before we ascertain whether it is, in fact, ours to decide?* (Butler 2004, 70-1; emphasis mine)

A moment of repose is not an inability to decide when the options are clear. Rather, a moment of repose allows us to consider carefully those few matters before we decide and before we determine it is our decision to make; by doing so the agent has not only preserved a wider range of options down the road, she has perhaps done justice to someone. She has also made a clear decision *not* to decide, for now. As noted above, there is clear pressure to rush a decision and act quickly, and not acting may seem like the least courageous or responsible thing to do, but that moment to defer judgment can be the

most effective strategy available for intervening.

The pressure placed on David to have vaginal surgery and live as a girl may give David a certain perspective on gender that can only be had from the margin. Medical staff, most of whom occupy presumably unambiguous gendered identity, told David “‘it’s gonna be tough, you’re gonna be picked on, you’re gonna be very alone, you’re not gonna find anybody’” (David quoted in Butler 2004, 71). Rather than submitting to this pressure, David says that it occurred to him that

these people gotta be pretty shallow if that’s the only thing they think I’ve got going for me; that the only reason why people get married and have children and have a productive life is because of what they have between their legs...if that’s all they think of me, that they justify my worth by what I have between my legs, then I gotta be a complete loser. (Ibid.)

Butler explains that the ‘I’ to whom David refers is not reducible to his genitalia; ‘he’ is something more than or distinct from his genitalia. Importantly for Butler’s intelligibility argument, he also believes others will recognize him as human and as having worth whether what is ‘between his legs’ matches anatomical norms or not. For this reason, David provides an important critique of the norms that govern gender. He operates outside the norm while blurring it as a criterion for intelligibility. His refusal to be reduced to what is between his legs and to “comply with its requirements” calls into question the conditions for human subjectification. In so doing, he “emerges at the limits of intelligibility, offering a perspective on the variable ways in which norms circumscribe the human” (74).

Insisting on a period of repose—whether from his parents and the medical community, or for us as evaluators of what decisions were made—does not vaporize the

pervasive gender norms or the violence that accompanies them. Given today's norms, we can speculate that David would have faced real struggles whether or not gender assignment procedures had been undertaken. But resisting the pressure to act quickly and decisively for a period of time is an important political strategy that could have opened up other alternatives.

What might a strategy like this look like in practice? Most people would agree that David's case was mishandled on one way or another. In contrast to Money and Diamond's attempt to grapple with gender ambiguity, I turn to the case of the Maines to illustrate how a strategy of repose might be pursued. Wayne and Kelly Maine gave birth to identical male twins, Jonas and Wyatt. From early childhood, Jonas was interested in activities commonly associated with boys, while Wyatt favored activities commonly associated with girls. "Wyatt favored pink tutus and beads. At 4, he insisted on a Barbie birthday cake and had a thing for mermaids. On Halloween, Jonas was Buzz Lightyear. Wyatt wanted to be a princess; his mother compromised on a prince costume" (English 2011). Wayne and Kelly struggled with how to handle the differences between their two twins, and the divide continued to grow. Was it an issue of psychology? Was it a passing phase that would subside during puberty? They eventually turned to the Gender Management Services Clinic at the Children's Hospital in Boston (GeMS).

Since its founding in 2007, GeMS has tackled issues of gender and sexuality in children, and is the "first pediatric academic program in the Western Hemisphere that evaluates and treats pubescent transgenders," (English 2011) which was the diagnosis given to Wyatt by GeMS' cofounder, Dr. Norman Spack. The clinic, which includes

geneticists, social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists, uses a variety of different treatments for a broad spectrum of gender-related issues in children. In this case, Wyatt was not identifying with his biological or given gender, Spack explained. Wyatt, who changed her name to Nicole, believed herself to be a girl and resented her male form. She believed she *was* a girl rather than wanting to become one. But Nicole had yet to undergo puberty as a male and her body was still developing. Dr. Spack recommended putting Nicole on medication that would significantly decrease the introduction of male hormones from the gonads in order to delay (male) puberty. The medication, sometimes called puberty blockers or puberty suppression, prevents or delays the bodily transformations that occur during puberty. Taking the drugs would buy critical time before Nicole developed into an adult male, a period of time during which ““most of us look pretty similar”” (Dr. Spack, quoted in English 2011). Identifying transgender issues early is important at GeMS because it increases the range of treatments available.

Importantly, puberty suppression is considered reversible because the body will revert back to producing hormones once the patient stops taking the medication. Spack believes that this is a crucial advantage of this particular treatment because a ““very significant number of children who exhibit cross-gender behavior”” before puberty ““do not end up being transgender”” (English 2011). The treatment offers more time to decide whether to make more permanent decisions about one’s gender. Eventually, Nicole is ““aiming...to undergo surgery to get a physical body that matches up to [her] image of [her]self,”” (Nicole, quoted in English 2011) but that choice is not permanent until she takes further steps.

Nicole's case is distinct from David's, but both struggle with the complex intersections of biological sex and cultural forms of gender. The mapping of gender and sex involves a complicated set of intersections, and the examples of Nicole and David are just two that further complicate the dyadic caricature of gender traditionally upheld. Their cases are preceded by a case unearthed by Michel Foucault in his text *Hercule Barbin* and later taken up by William Connolly (as well as Butler). The archived memoirs of a nineteenth century French individual named Alex/ina provides another instance of someone who cannot find "a place of sexual residence in a culture that maps sexuality onto gender duality and gender duality onto nature" (Connolly 2002b, 15) due to his/her ambiguously sexed body. The very existence of such an individual must not exist 'in nature.' Connolly continues:

the social stabilization of gender duality sustains its purity, first, by translating unsettled differences and ambiguities within the self into definitive differences between selves and second, by translating those recalcitrant to assimilation into either category into strange, sick, or monstrous beings to be suppressed, treated as mistakes of nature, or surgically repaired until they 'fit' one category or the other. (Connolly 2002b, 16)

When the ambiguity of Alex/ina's gender threatens to undermine the stability of the natural binary system, a strong impulse to shore up the binary is experienced by the authorities around him/her. The impulse manifests itself in violent and compensatory ways that ignore the effects such actions may have on Alex/ina. S/he simply cannot persist 'as is'; her biological makeup (in addition to the desires that coincide with that biology in complex ways) confounds the only system of gender culturally available to society. The existence of this anomaly, as well as numerous others similar to it, fails to

challenge the dominant paradigm that understands these cases *to be anomalies* in the first place. (Connolly 2002b, 27). Using the term ‘anomaly’ helps ensure that the foundation of gender is still secure, despite those ‘cases’ that do not fit neatly within its confines.

Such a strategy of *waiting* is not the absence of an option; it’s a real option, and it might be the difference between doing justice to someone and being unjust while staying with the boundaries of normalization. Along the way, the medical community and the rest of us may realize that the pressure to act quickly stems from a set of (often invisible) norms that reject gender ambiguity and demand a male/female dyad. Exposing those norms as incongruent with incidences of people who are ambiguously gendered is one of the advantages that stems from electing to wait on sexual assignment surgeries.

Connolly advocates a strategy consistent with this period of repose. He asks us to conceive of a world in which gender practices are ‘pluralized’ “according to undichotomized practices” (Connolly 2002b, 19). He recognizes that this may not seem immediately desirable, particularly to those who appear to more clearly fit within the intelligible grid of sexuality. But, even the conception of the pluralization of sexuality points to the contestability and contingency involved in such a bioculturally complicated intersection (Ibid.). One technique for nudging us closer to this world of ‘genderization’ involves recognizing and cultivating those ‘strange’ or dissonant aspects of our own identities. A second involves a presumptive generosity toward those who do not fit our preconceived map of lived experience. In both cases, a period of repose prior to passing judgment or making bold declarations about the nature of sex and sexuality might improve the chances of success of each strategy. Such a period allows time for norms to

transform (slightly or radically, slowly or rapidly) while our own perspectives undergo changes of their own. New, creative approaches to the pluralization of gender may emerge or be ushered into existence by activists. Instances of already-existent sexual plurality may further erode previously held certainties about the nature of dyadic gender, and new ways of understanding what it means to be ‘just’ to someone who appears to be an anomaly in relation to the norm may arise. A period of repose allows us to cultivate a sense of generosity while honing our ability to sense those identities that do not yet have a place in the normalized framework.

Mapping Repose through Flexibility and Plasticity

Given the pressure often placed on us to act, *not* acting can be the most difficult mode of agency discussed here. It, like flexibility and plasticity, grows out of the experience of flux and surprise in our lives. The inability to predict what will happen in the future coupled with the pressure to preserve a received notion of human agency all but guarantees that agents will be shocked, frustrated, and regretful about how things turn out from time to time. Our hope of political agency moving forward has to rest on something other than our ability to predict or control how events will unfold. Choosing repose over normalized reactions is one way to reduce feelings of *ressentiment* while opening a wider range of available options for intervention. As with flexibility and neuroplasticity, sometimes the preferred action is indirect, quiet, careful, and passes without calling too much attention to itself. Other times it is loud and hard to miss. But

the agent may have a better chance of achieving her desired ends if she considers all options.

The tactic of reflective repose is also compatible with the previously examined modes of agency. Early on in the trilogy, Oedipus obsesses about making a decisive, sovereign choice based on attaining the truth of the situation. When he discovers the truth about his prophesied curse in *Oedipus Rex*, his whole framework of being in the world shatters. Without a steady bearing, his world comes crashing down, and he gouges his eyes out. An older, less sovereign Oedipus may have adopted a period of repose before forcing his course and before blinding himself. We can only speculate, but his character becomes more attuned to dealing with a world that takes tragic turns from time to time. The sovereign figures in Sophocles' works seem unable to pause for a minute before acting. Their range of options for intervening must always involve immediate action, it seems. The minor characters, on the other hand, are sometimes willing to wait and see how things proceed before intervening. Even the sentry, whose indecision delays his announcement to Creon in *Antigone*, pauses to hold a committee meeting with his selves before approaching Creon. And it is possible to read Haemon's dialogue with Creon as a rhetorical moment of repose. Rather than making his objections to the sovereign's decree immediately known, he holds back. In order to preserve hope of convincing Creon to reverse his condemnation of Antigone, Haemon resists the temptation to immediately state his objection to Creon. Doing so would most likely harden Creon's sovereign resolve and seal Antigone's fate. Instead, he considers what he would like to accomplish, whom he is dealing with, and what the most effective course of action going forward

might be. He proceeds carefully: “A little more, a little less... When power becomes gracious and descends into view: beauty I call such descending” (Nietzsche 2006, 92).

Plasticity, too, benefits from the occasional use of repose (and vice versa). When read in the light of the neuroplasticity analysis in the second chapter, Butler’s analysis of coercive surgeries on individuals with ambiguous genitalia takes on another level. If, as Butler argues, norms have powerful influence over who we are and how we perform our identities, those norms must also be enabled and organized through the plasticity of the neuronal network. The cultural and material milieu in which we find ourselves interacts with our neuronal network and forms an assemblage, which partially manifests itself in the form of norms and normative violence. When Brenda comes to believe there is something wrong with her being a female rather than a male, it is through these pre-existing norms. The medical and psychological scrutiny surrounding David/Brenda must have found expression in his unfolding neuronal network and influenced the way he understood the relationship between himself, his body, and his gender. And so the debate between Money and Diamond becomes even more complicated. Given the scope and degree of plasticity in the neuronal network, gender can be reduced neither to socialization nor biology. Rather, there is no longer a clear distinction between the two. Cultural interaction—the development of the brain in the ‘open’ air—occurs on a biological level, and vice versa. The two sides of the culture/biology debate may each underestimate something: the first underestimates the role biology plays in culture, and the second, the ways cultural processes infuse and inform cultural processes. Without getting too reductive, if my subjectivity is conditioned and enabled by the norms I

encounter, and what I encounter has an impact on the way my plastic network of neural cells develop, my own mediated understanding of my gender could *press* me to perform that gender more ‘accurately.’ But, as we have also seen, it is a complicated network involving many intersections, and we cannot count on it developing in a predictable manner (foiling both Money’s and Diamond’s most basic claims).

What I have proposed in this chapter is another way of grappling with agency in a world that is neither fixed in binary ways nor susceptible to human mastery. It is also a mode of agency that is more congruent with a world marked by occasional surprises and a multiplicity of flows. Depending on the situation, sometimes the best of choice of action is a period of inaction joined with creative exploration and experimentation. Now the agent can closely observe how events are unfolding and develop a way forward before actually taking action. This tactic seems particularly important in the face of rapidly changing circumstances, when we have a small amount of information and are not able to effectively draw conclusions about the best way forward.

In the next chapter, I explore a fourth mode of agency that is similarly considered to be the absence of agency by many, but might actually be an important and active way of interpreting politics and idea formation. The act of watching—spectatorship—is a way of participating in flows in a particular way. To illustrate this claim, I take up two parodic television programs on *Comedy Central*.

Chapter 4

We're Watching: Spectatorship as Agency for Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert

In my first chapter, I argued that Sophocles may be demonstrating to his audience that the minor characters who exhibit a higher degree of flexibility in his *Oedipus* plays are often better equipped to deal with the tragic twists and turns shaping the plot, while stubborn characters often incur a less desirable outcome by digging in their heels. These plot developments take place via a particular format—in the form of a play. The action of Sophocles' tragic plots unfolds on stage, in front of an audience, and he writes with careful attention to what information is shared with the audience and between characters. Much of the drama derives from the fact that the audience knows something that one or more major characters do not, and we watch them confidently make the wrong choices, inviting their tragic ends. Spectators may sympathize or become frustrated with these tragic decision-makers. We may wonder if we would have made a different decision, if we had only the experience available to the Sophoclean character. The format and forum of the story contribute to the drama of the play. It would perhaps be written differently if it had not been intended to be performed in front of an audience. As spectators, we are drawn into the drama of the play. We are affected by the development of the plot and the fate of certain characters: we commiserate, celebrate, and cringe with characters as new information comes to light or unexpected events shift the trajectory of the play's action. Spectators are not passive objects placed in front of a stage. As spectators, *we participate in the play*. We are part of it.

In this chapter, I develop more explicitly the argument that spectatorship is an active mode of agency. The role of the audience is fundamental to the form and content of a play. The information the audience receives as well as *how* they receive it contributes to the drama of the story. In many cases, the audience learns about an event second-hand when a character describes what is happening off-stage or took place in the past. Rather than acting out the action in each scene, Sophocles makes the audience aware of what has happened indirectly, through dramatic reports to the characters. Doing so mitigates the logistical issues surrounding scenes that are particularly difficult to put on stage—a large battle is easier to explain than to portray on stage—but it also inserts a space between what ‘happens’ in the story and the audience becoming alerted to another layer of it. By adding another layer of explanation to the play, Sophocles invites the audience to evaluate the validity of the story based on the character speaking and the developing situation on stage, which further complicates what might have ‘actually’ happened. Most importantly, since we do not witness the action directly, memory, interpretation, experience, perspective, and interests all enter into the equation in more pressing ways. We form images and they become *imprinted*: our speculative images persist for a time as they inform our experience of the drama. In combination with our own affective impression of the story, these factors make dramatic Sophoclean moments even more fecund. As the action unfolds, each spectator’s context is mapped onto the contexts of the characters in the play. Each spectator is inter-involved with the action of the play—there can be no experience of it that is simply non-perspectival.

A couple of millennia later, the cable television network Comedy Central plays off particular notions of spectatorship, audience, and drama that can be linked to this Sophoclean tradition. Just as Sophocles did, Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*) capitalize on the involvement of the audience and their contextual relation to the show to stage dramatic moments. Their modes of satire connect to theories of perception and memory that require spectators in order to be effective. I argue that both Stewart and Colbert revolve around zones of indiscernibility, in which the audience cannot be certain of what these figures *mean* by what they are saying, and this zone can be a productive space for the incubation of creativity. I explore several approaches to their experimental roles that may help us theorize effective media interventions.

Do the shocks that we feel when we watch these programs have an impact on our carefully guarded frameworks of thought? Does repeating a news story in a humorous way open up space for a virtual difference and creative emergence? Does the manner in which news is presented have a significant impact on how much credence an audience gives it? And how do we process our perceptions of satire, irony, and parody when it comes to news programming? What about the effects of freeze framing?

Rather than theorizing a predictable and determinable result of these satirical media experiments, I argue that Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart both prime perception *and* help clear a space for creative experimentation on the part of the spectator. Both intervene in a dynamic and constant barrage of news media in ways that disrupt and displace its position(s) of authority. Rather than (merely) offering a competing narrative

of news coverage, they performatively critique the way in which news broadcasts are written and produced, as well as the credibility they are assumed to have. They allow infra-perceptual cues that belie the official storyline on the surface. This type of disruptive and subversive intervention is critical to a pluralization of the media landscape, and new approaches to political agency require such a pluralization. Spectatorship must be considered an important and essential mode of agency rather than merely a passive mode of experience.

Interest in Colbert and Stewart has not been isolated to the academic realm. The number of books, journal articles, and documentaries covering these two comedians has burgeoned over the last ten years. Their popularity has been welcomed by some as a breakthrough “reinvention of political journalism” (Baym 2005) and condemned by others as a low water mark for objective news reporting. Jon Stewart has been called the most important newscaster in the country (Baym 2005, 260) on television and *The Daily Show* has earned a Peabody. Since the arrival of *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert has: run for president, been interviewed on *Meet the Press*, given a talk at the National News Corps, started his own Super PAC, and testified in front of Congress. His and Stewart’s programs not only outpace their ‘competition’—cable news shows—they also capture the coveted youth market more effectively than any other news program. Cultural critics, media studies scholars, sociologists, journalists, political theorists, and a wide range of other academics are enthralled by what these two figures do and the effect it has on viewers. In part because Colbert and Stewart are so polarizing, scholars scramble to pin down what is occurring between 11pm and midnight on Comedy Central.

The existing literature has given us rich resources to advance a discussion of Stewart and Colbert. Part of my goal is to contribute to this literature; another part is to address what may be blind spots in this new field of study. The four primary elements in existing literature that are worth addressing are: A.) the tendency to conflate Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert as carriers of a singular media strategy rather than distinct (and complementary) approaches to the current media conversation; B.) an exclusive interest in the ‘content’ or ‘substance’ of the programs while neglecting less obvious stylistic elements (e.g. style, rhythm, pace, set design, interview style, freeze framing, graphical interaction); C.) a difficulty in responding to critics of the show who attempt to divorce the politics of the show from the comedic delivery; D.) a difficulty in identifying the complex ways irony and satire work in the context of the show—whoever Colbert and Stewart are, they are not merely leftists outlining a liberal political position.

Dramatizing Disruptions through Satire

In a recent work, Connolly commends Immanuel Kant on his ambitious approach to describing universal reason (Connolly 2013, 99). Connolly builds positive connections with Kant across lines of difference (culturally and temporally), locating those places of overlapping agreement and affinity between his work and Kant’s, though he is also critical of the way Kantian philosophy may “function to inhibit creative experiments in thought and practice,” “squeeze explanatory projects into too narrow a compass,” “define instrumental reason too sharply,” “obscure a needed dimension of ethical life,”

“express an existential anxiety that needs to be challenged,” and “demand an unrealistic image of time” (Connolly 2013, 98-9). He also locates small moments when Kant may unknowingly incorporate cultural elements specific to his particular milieu into his presentation of universal logic and transcendental argument. Doing so is problematic for Kant’s argument, of course, because his goal of making his understanding of reason universally applicable requires him to purge his argument of cultural specificities of perspectives and experience. Rather than dismissing Kant altogether as a result of these problems, Connolly argues that, like all of us, Kant makes use of culturally embedded experiences in order to make his argument (Connolly 2013, 103; 111-20) Because these creeds, ethoi, and ideas are deeply embedded, they often play a background or grounding function that can be difficult to identify from within the cultural terrain they emerge out of and in which they hold sway. But, they persist nonetheless, and affect the arguments that develop from them. Connolly seeks to show how Kant’s “‘apodictic’ starting points are more cloudy, inchoate, and filled with pluripotential incipencies than Kant admits them to be” (120). Rather than recognizing these as culturally embedded frameworks, Kant treats them as apodictic and universal starting points from which he can construct transcendental arguments (118-20).

In a pluralist world, where many differing (and often conflicting) cultural-framing creeds persist simultaneously, Connolly urges us to locate and understand how these frameworks that subsist below the intellectual level at the level of habit and affect contribute nonetheless to our understanding of the world. Not only are these frameworks culturally constituted and contingent, they also manifest themselves in ‘incipient

tendencies' and habits that are difficult to access directly—"confessions, devotional practices, church rituals, juridical assumptions, seminar assignments, school repetitions, parental inductions, media news reports, TV dramas, and institutional modes of responsibility and punishment both become infused into such dispositions, however imperfectly, and flow into higher registers of thinking" (Connolly 2013, 120). In order to challenge the ground from which the apodictic proceeds, Connolly advocates the use of minor affective 'shocks' that disrupt universal certitude and foreground a sense of contestability and ambiguity (more on this below). Doing so can reveal to us that, while systematic and carefully argued, Kant's argument is not completely airtight. In some cases, this realization helps us acknowledge that our own understanding of the world is not airtight, either. We all rely on such tendencies. Connolly puts pressure on Kant's collection of tendencies, just as he urges us to self-reflectively undertake the task. It is a difficult and unsettling call. Watching Comedy Central or something like it may aid in this effort: *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* call attention to and disturb those implicit contestable frames that we take for granted, and it is from these frames that our intellectual arguments develop. The techniques deployed by Connolly and Colbert are distinct, but the effect of unsettling culturally and politically embedded assumptions is comparable.

Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report* parodies a particular style of news broadcasts that feature guests and are commentary-based. Colbert often cites Bill O'Reilly as someone he emulates, and his program mimics much of the style, format, and tone of *The O'Reilly Factor*. Colbert, who stays in character throughout his show (as well

as outside of it, for the most part), offers conservative opinions about current events and controversial issues in a humorous, deadpan manner. The show often contains feature segments that parody features on other networks through exaggeration. His interviews with guests are often adversarial and are used in part to outline Colbert's position on a given issue. His character is self-involved and self-assured. The recurring segment "Tip of the Hat, Wag of the Tail" expresses approval or disapproval of people and groups in the news using snap judgments and a right-wing frame. In his recurring feature "Who's Attacking Me Now," Colbert aggressively fires back at his critics, rebutting their arguments in character. In a feature entitled "People Who Are Destroying America," *The Colbert Report* dramatizes the scare tactics used by some media organizations that amplify threats to America and American culture. In an August 2013 segment, Colbert interviews Mayor Johnny Cummings of Vicco, Kentucky, ("A fine town, but for how long?" Colbert asks as the narrator) who advocates an LGBT fairness ordinance that would prevent service and housing discrimination based on sexuality. The "brave Kentuckian" pastor who opposes the ordinance and "knows what fairness really means" argues that the people "should be able to fire, deny [homosexuals] service, or deny [homosexuals] housing" (*The Colbert Report*, 8/14/13). Colbert's frustration grows as he discovers that most citizens of Vicco do not oppose the bill, proving his stated point that America's family values are under attack. When the ordinance passes easily, Colbert dramatically laments in his voiceover tone that "Mayor 'Gayer' won, and small-town America lost." Perhaps the key here is how Colbert rifles off a series of snap judgments showing how easily they surface when such issues are in play. For Colbert, small-town

America is a sacred place, but it's also 'no' place' in that it doesn't exist in actuality. O'Reilly often takes a similar tack, and he notes that 'it' fails to live up to the expectations we have for it. Is an idea of small-town America the model to which we are aspiring? If so, where is it, and what does it look like? Colbert gives us the sense that we are losing a battle of values, along with our identity as American. 'We' are under attack. Colbert pans down and zooms in on one small town in Kentucky with an openly gay mayor to epitomize how America *in general* is falling apart (*The Colbert Report*, 8/14/2013).

Along with representing political and intellectual *views* on his program, Colbert enunciates a certain set of culturally embedded assumptions that his character takes for granted. These assumptions often operate beneath the surface of the views being explicitly expressed throughout the program. They call attention to the way in which similar assumptions do similar work beneath the surface of mainstream news networks. Because his version of right-wing arguments is often exaggerated and/or taken to an absurdist end, the framing assumptions behind the arguments take shape for the spectator. Just as Connolly locates those flashpoints where Kant relies on a culturally derived framework rather than universal starting points, Colbert calls attention to what the media treats as a given, by enacting it in extreme ways. By doing so, Colbert puts pressure on the culturally embedded frameworks (FOX News' and maybe our own) that help constitute more organized opinions and ideas. Colbert deploys several strategies toward this end: he points out and then leans against our embedded assumptions, which have remained unmentioned or are assumed to be universal; he disrupts the logic of those who

pursue political strategies stemming from apodictic certitudes, revealing them to be contingent and assumptive rather than foundational facts (and he also disturbs the stubbornness of thought in the face of contingency); he performatively reminds us what it sounds like when someone aggressively asserts a position in intransigent and uncompromising terms (usually when confronted by someone with an alternate set of culturally embedded creeds), as well as what it sounds like when conversations are laced with crude interruptions rather than being dialogical; and he articulates exaggerated or absurd positions that are extensions of the logic expressed elsewhere on the media landscape without directly criticizing them. The results of these pressures are not predictable. One possible response to them is to dig one's heels in and aggressively reassert what one 'knows' to be true, as early Oedipus and Creon did in Sophocles' tragedies. O'Reilly does the same on his program and in his interviews (he and Creon have much in common). Those figures insist on aggressively pursuing their previous mode of engagement with the world rather than acknowledging the elements of contingency woven into their arguments.

But, other responses are possible. In some cases, when we experience pressures on embedded cultural constitution, and when these are expressed in a humorous and non-threatening way, *a small space for consideration opens up*. Such a space invites us to look more closely at the way our foundational understandings are culturally constituted rather than universally shared; it provides terrain for the cultivation of new and undeveloped ideas. The richer and more sophisticated ideas that may develop from these protean ideas would have been unlikely to form absent this disruption of the dominant

logic. The goal is to unsettle the work that may appear to be already settled and foundational, and to do so long enough to invite creative responses to this disruption. Because we cannot know in advance what the result of these protean developments will be, the concept of the virtual moving toward actualization is an apt metaphor. My contention is that Colbert's media experiments clear the ground for creative emergence. When Colbert is surprised and dismayed that the heterosexual council members in Vicco approve of the fairness ordinance (and offer arguments for their position), he indirectly calls into question the grounds for anti-gay sentiments. By agreeing with the pastor who favors discrimination, the absurdity of discriminatory arguments comes to light. It seems clear that the election of a gay mayor in a tiny town in Kentucky does not constitute an 'attack on America,' but hearing Colbert satirically explain why it is makes us question the validity of positions held by conservative figures in the media.

Revisiting Connolly's analysis of Kant reveals a comparable technique. Connolly loosens up Kant's tightly constructed logic through drama and disruption: if his initial starting points are not universal truths from which he can build the rest of his argument, the whole project takes on a more contingent aspect. Although Connolly is wary of the dangers that can stem from a will to system and the preliminary judgment involved in a strictly systematic interpretation of morality (Connolly 2013, 126), this does not make Kant 'wrong' *per se*. He unsettles that which, for Kant, was settled absolutely and unquestionably. As he makes this argument, Connolly acknowledges the contestability of his own argument and the accompanying habits underpinning it. He encourages us (as spectators of a sort) to do the same. Colbert undertakes a similar task using his own

arsenal of tactics. Instead of articulating a positive agenda that would appeal more to the intellectual register of a spectator, Colbert stages a disruption in the form of satire to demonstrate the culturally derived nature of (only apparently) apodictic truths. The use of satire calls attention to those foundational claims that help frame belief systems but which remain invisible until illuminated by tactical means. This experience can be ‘shocking.’

Connolly, too, is interested in the ‘news’ programming on Comedy Central. In a brief passage in a 2006 article, Connolly mentions Colbert and Stewart in a single paragraph. The article discusses the way advertisers use recent discoveries in the field of neuroscience to make advertisements more effective. One way to accomplish this is to key in on triggers that mobilize action across large groups of people: “Political leaders, talk show hosts, and product advertisers seek to mobilize such nonconscious patterns of resonance across large constituencies and to encourage the results to flow into consciousness” (Connolly 2006, 74). We are largely unaware of these strategies as they modify our behavior, habits, decision-making processes, and intellectual life. Our understanding of how and why these tactics work is still in the early stages, but it is clear that they have effects. Connolly urges thinkers to delve deeper into these strategies in order to understand how they are being used now and to delve into ways of utilizing them in productive (and progressive) ways. His three-tiered strategy includes exposing those who are deploying such tactics, developing counter-tactics that seek to achieve alternative goals, and publicizing how these strategies “themselves impinge upon the affectively

rich, nonconscious layers of life” (Connolly 2006, 74). As a brief example of such a strategy, Connolly points toward Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert:

The way in which Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart mimic and exaggerate the orchestration of image, voice, music, sound, and rhythm by media stars such as Bill O’Reilly provides one starting point. They do not simply expose factual misstatements—an inadequate response to influences exerted in part upon affective states situated below the refined intellect. Instead, they fight fire with fire, reenacting media strategies of inculcation by parodying them. Clearly, however, much more thought and experiment is needed in order to both expose and respond to the media tactics that attempt to code the visceral register of affect-imbued judgment. (Connolly 2006, 74)

I have explored a few ideas of what these counter-strategies look and sound like, and I will continue to develop what I think occurs when we watch *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in the larger context of major media networks. The effects of these shows go beyond comedy. One effect of these programs is the emergence of a ‘zone of indiscernibility,’ in which spectators cannot be certain of what a speaker ‘really’ means when he or she speaks. Uncertainty surrounds the speech act because the spectator cannot immediately determine which elements of the statement are ‘genuine’ and which ones are part of the satire. A potential response to this uncertainty is to accept the invitation to speculate on an alternative to what is being said. By keeping that moment of indiscernibility open for a moment, the likelihood of creative idea formation is increased in a way that would be far less likely if the spectator immediately knew that the speaker was being ‘serious.’

When the spectator becomes accustomed to the media strategies seen on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, he or she can bring these powers of observation to bear on the strategies deployed in other media outlets. Spectators may become suspicious

of the credibility or objectivity of broadcast news as a result. Those who watch Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert regularly may develop subterranean sensors to detect the underlying styles of persuasion used on shows like *The O'Reilly Factor*. If so, perhaps they can draw from these tools as they dwell in this newly formed zone of indiscernibility. A new perspective or idea may emerge that was unavailable until that particular intersection of perceptive experiences was encountered. My sense is that such zones of indiscernibility are fertile ground for new and creative approaches to complex problems.

Meaning What He Says: The Real Stephen Colbert

Thinkers who take an interest in Colbert argue that the source of his parodic value is that he clearly does not 'mean' what he says. His brand of humor would land differently if he did. The argument is undoubtedly true: part of the comedy and impact of the show stems from our understanding that, at least in one sense, he does not mean what he says. However, there is an inverse problem accompanying this argument to which we must attend: if Colbert isn't 'saying what he means,' what does he *actually* mean? Can we infer from his use of parody that he *means* the opposite of whatever he says? Is there a way to decode the satire and figure out what Colbert *actually* feels about a given issue? Can we reverse engineer his agenda from his satirical stance?

These questions are often addressed by making speculative inferences. Media analysts deduce a position from Colbert's exuberant advocacy of that position's

antithesis, figuring that he must genuinely support the opposite of the position he advocates. After all, Colbert is rarely out of character, and he rarely if ever outlines his ‘real’ views directly when he is, so we are left to draw our own conclusions about what he believes. Is there a reason for this curious void where his real political stances should be found? By my analysis, it is not only impossible to ‘uncover’ exactly what Colbert’s *actual* positions are, the very attempt to do so misses the program’s strength. Our goal should not be to figure out what he really means when we hear what he says, but to focus on what he *is* saying and particularly *how* he says it. There does not need to be an authentic Colbert sitting opposite the character seen on television. If there were, much of what we gain from watching the program would be lost through binary reductionism: ‘whatever I say, you should believe the opposite.’

Contra this model of deducing who the real Colbert is and how he would feel about a current event if he weren’t in character, I argue that the show is effective because it precludes us from drawing such a conclusion with great confidence. The show is written in a way that allows a variety of interpretations, none of which are stable enough to be pinned down with certainty. Several different perceptual elements come together when we watch the *Report*: our own background and memories mingle with dominant narratives presented on major news networks, and they interact anew when Colbert puts his spin on them. The possible reactions available to this commingling of experiential differences are multiple. A political assemblage with pluropotentiality materializes: each element of the assemblage contributes to its overall composition, but none has a definitive effect on what emerges from this assemblage. Each layer of complexity is

multiplied by the other, from what Colbert says, what he means, and our own position vis-à-vis these identifiable spaces. Colbert creates a critical space between each of the layers involved, staging a disruptive encounter. These cloudy spaces become fecund sites for creative emergence. Colbert does not often bait us with a prepackaged conclusion we can uncover if we watch carefully, though he sometimes does. This complex assemblage of memories, major news programming, and Colbert's performance is the source of creative emergence because definitive conclusions cannot be drawn in advance. Colbert's 'actual position' has an effect on our experience of the show without becoming legible.

Parsing the Parodies

In spite of the fact that the two programs are often conflated when discussed, the differences between Colbert and Stewart are what make each effective when put in conjunction with the other. Both shows can be categorized as parodic, but they deploy divergent strategies. Stewart is often a straightforward watchdog. He calls attention to instances of political hypocrisy, journalistic incompetence, or frivolous arguments between competing parties, and he does so in a humorous way. He pokes fun at broadcast journalists while sitting at a desk that looks much like theirs. And he makes it clear that he does not play the same role or by the same rules as they purport to.

Stewart's criticism of event coverage by major media outlets illuminates the way the 24-hour news cycle often struggles to keep its viewership through superficial spectacles or rampant speculation, and by putting together clips and compilations from

their coverage, he makes this case effectively. In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing, Stewart dedicated full segments to CNN's sensational, on-location coverage and its rampant real-time speculation. Stewart opens his criticism with a graphic mocking CNN's tagline: "The Most Busted Name in News." He then cuts to a clip of CNN announcing the arrest of a suspect, a "dark-skinned male"—news that is a CNN exclusive. "We got him," the CNN reporter says, and Wolf Blitzer repeats that this is "dramatic, exclusive reporting." Growing serious for a moment, Stewart compliments CNN for its comprehensive and 'exclusive' coverage. "This is why you turn to CNN in a crisis," he says. "You know, we make fun of them sometimes, we do. We tell jokes at their expense. But obviously because they have the boots on the ground and they can do the reporting, as one of their competitors, I guess we just get a little jealous...of these kinds of *exclusives*." After a brief pause, Stewart continues. "*Although*, we soon learned there was a very good reason why this was *exclusive*." He cuts back to CNN interviewing Tom Fuentes, who clarifies that "There has been no arrest, and in fact, a suspect has not been identified by name yet." Stewart jumps on the pay-off: "Oh! It's exclusive because it was completely, fucking, wrong...that's why it was *exclusive*." He then plays clips of CNN anchors emphasizing the importance of not going down the "road of speculation wrongfully," and yells "*But that is what you are doing!*" Over the course of the afternoon, using the myriad resources at CNN's disposal, the news team reported that a suspect had been identified, was in custody, and was a dark-skinned man, all of which was false. The pressure to report *something* trumps the pressure to report something accurate (*The Daily Show*, 4/17/13). To set up his criticism of the coverage of a shooting

at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C., Stewart explains: “in the absence of breaking news, cable news channels rely on a variety of one tactic to hold the viewers’ attention: concise, informative reporting...” He starts laughing and says that he’s “just kidding around, it’s more like *this*,” showing a montage of different cable news pundits and guests screaming at each other, talking over each other, and calling each other names. But, he says, after a tragedy like the one that has occurred in Washington, D.C., the real reason for cable news coverage comes to the fore: “It’s times like these that we require the type of context and clarity that only these noble, dormant cable giants...[audience laughing] why are you laughing? ... can provide.” After a quick clip of a pundit saying “I don’t want to speculate, *but*...” Stewart returns with, “Oh I’m sorry, did I say context and clarity? I meant speculation.” A flashy graphic animation slides across the screen that resembles those seen on CNN and other news networks, although this one is titled “WRONGNADO.” Stewart then walks through a compilation of clips of several reporters speculating or misreporting information throughout the course of the day. He then takes specific aim at CNN and cuts to a reporter play-by-playing apparently irrelevant observations: “This is down 11th Street, you see a couple of officers rushing down the street, we’ve seen some tactical vehicles...we can see some of these squad cars around here...this is apparently some kind of a rescue chopper...that’s about as low as we’ve seen him go, so that is kind of an interesting development.”

“No, no, those aren’t interesting developments,” Stewart fires back, “you’re just standing in front of a camera, naming shit you see. It’s like walking down the street with a five year old” (*The Daily Show*, 9/17/13).

Stewart continues as CNN speculates about what the suspect's motive might be based on his attire despite "CNN's brash, on-air acknowledgment that they should not be doing this [type of speculation] at all." Wolf Blitzer explains that CNN journalists sometimes speculate and that those speculations may—or are even likely to—be wrong. Stewart compiles a dozen or more examples of such speculation from the same coverage and follows the clip with a comparison: "No one else in the world is allowed to operate that way: 'Hello I'm your doctor, you have cancer. Obviously, a lot of my initial diagnoses are very, very wrong. That being said you have cancer, unless you don't, these test results just keep coming in so fast and furious and I can't wait. I'll know for sure in an hour if you have cancer or not, but fuck it, you have cancer, I just gotta get it out!'"

Stewart's exaggeration focuses our attention on the strategy CNN and others deploy during these heavily covered events. But *why* is this CNN's preferred approach to journalism? Stewart: "And that's when I realized...all of yesterday's confusion in the reporting...it's not a mistake...This is deliberate, the chaos, the vomit on to the screen, the very thing we thought news organizations were created to clarify, is a *feature*, not a *bug*." A clip of CNN Worldwide President Jeff Zucker is cued. He explains that immediately after making the on-air reporting mistakes during the Boston Bombing coverage, CNN had their biggest audience in ten years. Zucker attributes this spike in ratings to an audience who understands that a mistake was made and that it was acknowledged by CNN. Stewart disagrees: "Oh my God, the lesson they take from this is, it doesn't matter how much they betray our trust, we'll keep coming back... We're in an abusive relationship with CNN" (*The Daily Show*, 9/17/13).

Viewership through immediacy and sensationalism is the goal. It outweighs accurately reporting an event. As long as the coverage appears sensational, exclusive, and in real time, CNN will get the viewership it is after, whether it makes mistakes or not (or perhaps *because* it makes mistakes—the mistakes can be more sensational and can leave ample room for future correction). By focusing intensely on a news story that is not developing, in which new information is not being produced quickly enough, 24-hour news organizations are able to capture the attention of a large viewership. Other more important and persistent stories fade into the background. This is the technique magicians use to get audience members to pay attention to one hand, where the action *appears* to be, rather than the other hand, where the actual trick is being accomplished. Part of figuring out what is happening in the hand that matters requires debunking the misdirection involved, and Stewart's technique is effective at doing just that. His approach to CNN includes not only a criticism of misreporting and speculating, but also of the culture of a 24-hour news cycle, in which interest for stories has to be drummed up in order to maintain viewership.

In another segment, Stewart points out the way in which CNN in particular tends to simplify news stories so that viewers come away with a yes-or-no, black-or-white opinion of a story, regardless of the nuances involved. Complexity is erased by forcing analysts and commentators into diametrically opposed answers. In a network-wide attempt to give its audience a clear take-home message for each of its stories, CNN implemented a theme of asking whether something is a 'good idea' or a 'bad idea'. "This is why the news networks serve such an important purpose in helping to clarify--all of

those issues we talked about earlier are very complex--and we rely on these news networks to provide context, substance...I'm just fucking with you! The news networks are there to let you know that whether you look at an issue from the right, or from the left...those are the only two ways you can look at it. But not anymore...CNN has moved beyond this simplistic partisan worldview...to a '*simplisticier*' one." A montage of clips are shown in which a CNN reporter presents a news story and asks, "Is this a good idea? Or a bad idea?" Stewart continues: "'Good thing or bad thing. Let's go to our analyst, Flippy the Coin? Bad! What are the odds?' The beautiful thing about good/bad is, like beige, it goes with everything, in an equally unsatisfying manner..." He then shoots out several examples of a variety of reports that conclude with the pundit asking: "good idea or bad idea?" He uses the technique itself to expose the technique. As analysts attempt to parse even basic background information about stories, they are cut off by CNN broadcasters interrupting: "Can you just say is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Capturing the complexity story—even a minimal level of complexity—gets in the way of this simplified, definitive takeaway. For CNN, it appears, informing viewers is reducible to a thumbs-up or thumbs-down approach to journalism. Stewart then impersonates a fictional CNN executive explaining: "'Look, nobody watches this network unless they're at the airport or going somewhere, so 86 the professor talk and just let the people know does this story go in my happy bag or my sad bag. Emoticon me, chop chop!'" (Stewart 10/29/2013)

In contrast to Stewart, Colbert performatively *enacts* the way major media outlets cover the news. His enthusiastic (and at times hyperbolic) mimicry of FOX News and

other networks draws attention to their approach without explicitly criticizing them. By imitating the interview style of pundits like Bill O'Reilly or Sean Hannity in a humorous fashion, he gestures toward a critical stance without directly outlining it. And, by idolizing O'Reilly on his program, he can make a credible case for modeling his style after "Papa Bear" himself. The spectator knows that Colbert is not *really* as big an O'Reilly supporter as he purports to be, but again, this suspicion takes a back seat to how similarly Colbert and O'Reilly behave (one satirically, one earnestly). Colbert's performance alerts us to the way O'Reilly and others use similar tactics in a non-satirical way.

In an interview on *Meet The Press* in October of 2012 (Gregory 2012), Colbert explained his character in this way:

GREGORY: A lot of what your character does, a lot of what you do through the program, is similar to what you're talking about the Super PAC [sic]. You expose what's absurd or what simply doesn't work about politics and about our institutions of government, which I think a lot of your-- your followers and your-- and your viewers believe.

MR. COLBERT: Well, I don't know-- I don't know...

GREGORY: That institute...

(Cross talk)

MR. COLBERT: ... I don't know if I-- I don't know if I expose it. But I try to be-- I try to be aspects. I try to put myself in the news or to embody the thing. Rather than like Jon does like what's called pure deconstruction, where he picks apart what's happened in the day's news and he kind of lays it out for you like a cadaver. You know, and like...

GREGORY: Right. And he-- and he...

MR. COLBERT: ...but I-- but I-- I falsely reconstruct the news. Mitt will put the leaders of Iran on notice. Right. You know, and so that's a different way of doing the same kind of job.

GREGORY: To make a-- to make a point of the absurdity, right?

MR. COLBERT: Right. Exactly. Exactly. And if-- if I do it, and something in the news is doing it, that thing, that real thing, is probably a bull. Because if I can go out and do it, and-- and it's happening in the real world, the closer it is to me, the less you should trust it.

GREGORY: Why do you think so many people think you and Jon Stewart are more effective at exposing hypocrisy, getting to real truths, than the-- than the news media is?

MR. COLBERT: I don't know-- I don't know if that's the case.

GREGORY: Well, I think there are certain people who believe that.

MR. COLBERT: Okay. That [sic] they're entitled to their beliefs. I don't know. I mean jokes make things palatable. I would say that. Comedy just helps an idea go down. That's all. And-- and it's-- and just makes you listen for a minute.

By explaining that he 'falsely reconstructs' the news as opposed to picking it apart, Colbert is not arguing that there exists a 'true' way to construct the news as opposed to a false way. Both Colbert and Stewart are critical of major media outlets, but the alternative they appear to present is not simply a 'truer' ("truthier?") approach to news. Rather, Stewart 'picks apart' the news while Colbert attempts to enact what others do; Colbert foregrounds their background props and techniques in order to performatively demonstrate how they work. Doing so clears a virtual space in which the frameworks put forth by major news networks appear more fragile and less definitive. Stewart points out problems with the way things are reported, while Colbert teaches us a subterranean skillset capable of detecting tactics deployed by major media players. For instance, after a spectator sees O'Reilly badger someone in an interview by asking leading questions and refusing to listen to the responses, the experience of watching Colbert engage in similar tactics may elicit a new set of responses. Watching O'Reilly in isolation is less likely to yield this result. You might know you oppose him but be less aware of *how* he does his work. His credibility as an objective or trustworthy news figure is thus compromised through Colbert's performative imitation of him in a satirical (and funny) way. We may not always realize what type of tools we are picking up from Colbert, but they have an

effect nonetheless. As a layer of memory, they contribute to modes of experience drawn from other news media.

It is true that Colbert and Stewart present views that contrast to many of the major news outlets, but they do not *merely* present distinctive views. In some cases, they avoid presenting a clear view at all. In other cases, the views presented exist alongside both the humor of the situation and the criticism aimed at the current target. There is something else going on that makes the interaction between these two programs and other networks intriguing. They are not merely presenting a different side to stories in the news. They are also critiquing *the way* stories and views are commonly told, as well as the idea of a monolithic and objective approach to complex political problems or rapidly developing events. *The interstices of spectator, news networks, Colbert, Stewart, and the news of the day produce a virtual space that incubates creative potentialities.* Colbert and Stewart's respective styles of parody hold this space open for a moment of duration. The space is an invitation to spectators to think critically and creatively about the views with which they are presented. An invitation issued from a place of satire subsists on multiple registers above and below the conscious threshold of intellectual argument. Vague beginnings of intelligible ideas bubble up and begin to form more complex ideas, which eventually coagulate into fuller, sophisticated ideas, arguments, viewpoints, and political stances. From their beginning, though, there is no way to anticipate what the more mature results will develop into. Following Deleuze, ideas actualize creatively: the elements from which they are constituted play a role, but they do not determine the outcome in a predictable or mechanistic way. The elements themselves are insufficient to determine

what will actualize—there is an element of creativity involved in the process. Only in retrospect can we understand how the current situation emerged from a particular set of conditions in the past. It is possible to modify conditions and to stage interventions, but the presence of virtuality means that we cannot be certain of how things will turn out. Colbert and Stewart experiment on the air, and these experiments pressure our deep impulses and foundational frameworks (whether we are aware of it or not). Our initial idea sets are intercepted on registers we cannot directly access, and these interceptions have an *effect* on the more formalized registers that develop later in the process.

In order to extend the argument that spectatorship is not a passive or dissociated activity, I draw from Bergson's analysis of perception and its connections to memory. Memory has a virtual component, too, because we experience past memories anew with each perceptual moment. Memories are not fossilized records of an experience—they are dynamic and transform when they are connected up to new experiences and memories. Each element of memory is taken up anew in the present moment. Experiments in micro media politics may show us a way of intervening at the level of perception rather than exclusively at the level of the intellect.

The Perception of Parody

The centrality of perception vis-à-vis political agency is amplified if one believes, as Bergson does, that *who we are* is essentially indistinguishable from *what we perceive*. As bodies, subjects take in sense data from their surroundings, distilling that data into

discernible perceptive instances of the present experience and processing it in conjunction with layered recollections of past inputs—what we call memories. Memories are sedimented, condensed recollections of what has been previously perceived. Memories and perceptions are material interpretations of the world that are dependent on the physicality of the body; the way the body’s nervous system reacts to sense inputs is a product of the perceptive faculty of the mind: “There is then only a difference of degree—there can be no difference in kind—between what is called the perceptive faculty of the brain and the reflex functions of the spinal cord” (Bergson 2012, 10). Memories of previous inputs are not comprehensive records of what occurred, though. They are condensations of overwhelming amounts of sense data reduced into manageable sets. A fraction of the sense data collected is siphoned off and processed as a memory. Our perception of the world stems from the intersection of these memory sets and the ‘new’ inputs we experience. Every perception and every reaction to something perceived is related to and constituted through layers of past experience. Furthermore, if the action or reaction to the combination of inputs and memories is considered the present moment, it also incorporates a movement into the future. These three elements that constitute a present moment of perception cannot be isolated from one another or divided into separate instants. Each plays a critical role in what Bergson calls a living present: past, present, and future, overlapping and indiscernible from one another in a moment of duration. Only in abstract (or ‘intellectualist’) theory can we understand each element on its own. We cannot understand the future as unrelated to both the past and the present as we experience it:

It may be said that we have no grasp of the future without an equal and corresponding outlook over the past, that the onrush of our activity makes a void behind it into which memories flow, and that memory is thus the reverberation, in the sphere of consciousness, of the indetermination of our will...the moment has come to reinstate memory in perception. (Bergson 2012, 69)

From Bergson's perspective, our past experiences "mingle" with our experience of the present, and it is through this "mingling" that the present moment is actually experienced. Memory "enriches" experience through a recollection of past experiences (70). The past, present, and future—or "perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other; and are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis" (72). Again, memories of an experience are not 'records' of that experience, but perceptions of experiences that are now past. The experience, when it was in the present, was itself a combination of processing inputs and previous memories. The memory of that perception as we experience it in the present is now a composite of the past present memory-experience and the present memory-experience. After the fact, a memory of an experience is not static or permanent. Each memory is active in, and activated through, experience. Perception is a process. Our everyday experiences are made up of this process of perception. A decision that emerges at a crossroads is made as a result of memories and perceptions interweaving, shaping one another. For instance, seeing a parent drop a child off at school may trigger memories of one's own childhood experience of being dropped off, or other memories associated with parents, school, goodbyes, old friends, anxiety, joy, or other affective reflections called to the foreground. Visceral memories may become inflected by the affective experience of the scene being observed, transforming those past memories in the present.

In addition, although perception is an active process, it is irreducible to conscious activity. No clear distinction can be made between the unconscious and the conscious (Bergson 2012, 190)—they are tangled up together. Perception is a multivalent dataset that ranges from the most basic experiences beneath the conscious level all the way up to complex and intellectual ideas and thoughts. Our experience oscillates through layers of perception, and, as an aggregate, these layers form our idea of the present.

Bringing this Bergsonian understanding of perception and memory to bear on the media landscape illuminates the effectiveness of figures like Stewart and Colbert. As spectators, we experience media as a series of perceptions. We draw from these perceptions as we experience the present, (re-)understand the past, and move toward the future. The way information is presented in the media is not merely one set of ideas for us to consider. Rather, these affect-imbued ideas become embedded in our perceptive life, flowing into our conscious thoughts. In addition, the *way* these ideas are presented begins to constitute the default mode for conveying information through media. Ideas are interwoven with images, sounds, set designs, wardrobes, graphical interpretations, facial expressions, rhythms, affective intonation, pacing, choice of emphasis, sequencing decisions, omissions or silences, timing choices, and specific phrasing, all of which present ideas in a particular light. The delivery vehicle of media outlets becomes a part of our perception. It becomes an influential mode of taking in information, even if we are unable to recognize this in real time. When information is presented in a way that is incompatible with these modes of media, we are more inclined to tune out or change the channel, regardless of the ‘content’ of the media. As media outlets become better at

entertaining audiences and making ratings, these formulas become ubiquitous. As they do, we become accustomed to the approach as one of authority. News media formulae receive a degree of credence and are treated as authoritative. Spectators *perceive* news media as the method of informing them about events. The media modes in which news broadcasts traffic look and sound like balanced sources rather than subjective points of view linked to agendas. When we see a news studio and someone in a suit reading from a teleprompter, we are trained to absorb most of the message before we also criticize part of its form and content.

On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart plays off these media strategies. As the show's voice-over announces the date and the location of the studio, the camera pans down to one that closely resembles the studios at major news networks. The lighting, Stewart's suit and makeup, the camera angles—these all call to mind the dozens of news programs spectators have watched in the past. Once the program gets started, it becomes clear that Stewart's work parallels these approaches while parodying them. The dissonance between the frozen image (stills) and the passing image (action clips) on *The Daily Show* works on and against our embedded perceptions of news media. His long still shots, designed to fix an inadvertent expression long enough to read the subtext into the text, are perfect in this regard. Our sedimented perceptual memories of news media in general are called upon in real time as we experience *The Daily Show*. The disruption felt by the experience of discord—between Stewart and, say, CNN—has an effect on the way we take in the news. We experience these disruptions as a loosening of the newscast authority. An uninterrupted stream of 'infotainment' from 24-hour news media outlets

purporting to report from a place of authority will encourage a specific range of idea formation. Stewart interrupts that stream and puts pressure on the authority from which these news outlets present. What we feel is a minor, perhaps subterranean erosion of authority.

Intellectualizing a news bias through careful analysis and clear exposition has journalistic value and ought to play a role in how we understand the media landscape. But given the way perception works, such a tactic is radically insufficient for opening up virtual space for creative idea formation. Stewart is a critical rejoinder to the rest of the media landscape because he challenges this stream from points of entry on various perceptual registers, and the constellation of these tactics is what counters the pervasive influence of the major news outlets. Marketing and entertainment experts have understood this for decades, though the delivery vehicle has become more constant and ubiquitous over the past twenty years. Given the powerful role marketing plays in multiple facets of our (media) lives, it seems naive to believe news journalism is insulated from such a pervasive influence. Using a wider variety of experimental techniques to challenge these modes of broadcast journalism provides the best opportunity for spectators to think critically and creatively about the way news is “covered.”

Colbert adds an additional component that intensifies Stewart’s impact while also performing a distinct function himself. Colbert is not merely criticizing news outlets (and politicians, policies, responses to current events, trends, etc.): in a similar fashion to major news outlets, he performatively reproduces them in an exaggerated mode. Colbert

mimics his ‘rivals’ while vocally admiring the job they are doing. His avid support of all things on the right—whether political or media-related—makes his criticism less direct than Stewart’s. *Colbert performs the problems with news media to which Stewart calls attention.* Among the many positions Colbert has espoused over the years, he has consistently and unapologetically been: critical of intellectuals (he prefers ‘truthiness’ and ‘thinking from the gut’); extremely patriotic above all other values; supportive of gun ownership rights, in favor of an aggressive foreign policy; against undocumented workers; opposed to same-sex marriage; unable to see race; laudatory of the neoliberal mode of economics; and acclamatory of the GOP, particularly their more conservative leanings. A slightly less exaggerated version of this list can be mapped on to pundits like Bill O’Reilly. But when Colbert presents his ideas in character, the conclusions seem absurd. Sometimes this is because he has extended them to their logically absurd ends, or because the audience is laughing. Sometimes it is because he challenges the structure of the right’s arguments *internally*, by enacting its narrative in an exaggerated format.

Specifying Satire

John W. Self (2011) traces the way satire operates in *The Daily Show*. His argument concurs that the power of Stewart’s presentation stems not only from an intellectual level. Rather, it relies upon context and distortion to have its intended effect on spectators. Borrowing from the canon of satire theory, Self illuminates the way intellect often seeks order, while satire seeks distortion. As a result, the intellect’s search

for order is confounded by one of several available satirical sub-tactics: “exaggeration, understatement and pretense” (Feinburg 1967, 4; quoted in Self 2011, 64). A viewer’s response to these tactics is not known in advance, but the affective characteristics of the statement will have an effect on the way the literal meaning is received by the spectator. Stewart plays off this understanding of satire.

Self schematizes the rapid-fire process that occurs when satire is encountered. First, the spectator recognizes that the literal meaning of the statement is not what the author intended. Second, the spectator “tries out alternative explanations, all of which will be incongruent with the literal meaning” (Self 2011, 64). Immediately following this brainstorming of possible meanings, Self (following Booth 1974) postulates that the audience speculates what the author must be intending based on context and previous knowledge of the author’s beliefs and knowledge. This third step is necessary in order to retroactively confirm the first step—that the author is intending the statement to be satirical rather than literal. Finally, based on the confluence of speculated intentions on the part of the author, the knowledge, beliefs, and experience of the spectator, and the available remaining meanings of the satirical statement, “*new meaning can be constructed by the audience*” (65, emphasis mine).²³ It is impossible to anticipate what those new meanings will be; they function in a space of pluripotentiality.

While this examination of satire might read as slightly over-schematic, its conclusions are useful for thinking about my reading of Colbert and Stewart. However, the process of experiencing satire is rarely as linear as Self suggests. Particularly with regard to Colbert (but also Stewart sometimes), the steps can be reversed: the conclusion

²³ Self is borrowing from Booth (1974) for this schematic analysis of parody, satire, and irony.

of the third step—knowing what the author had *actually* intended by the satirical statement—is speculative, tentative, and, importantly, remains unconfirmed. In actuality, the third step in the process often precedes the first, or they happen simultaneously. Our *guess* as to whether the statement is intended as satire relies on certain elements to confirm this suspicion only later in the statement. We go along with the speaker’s statement while remaining unsure as to whether the speaker is being serious or satirical. In this case, because of the nature of the network and these two shows, we can guess that the statement is building to one or more satirical conclusion with varying degrees of confidence, but we don’t know exactly what that will be or what non-satirical statements will be required to arrive at that stage. The spectator brings to bear his or her memories of the content being discussed from other news sources, combines them with previous knowledge of the show being watched, and senses new affective and informational clues from Stewart or Colbert. The result is a tangling of steps, as the context dynamically develops to the spectators in order to speculate particular meanings from the news segments.

Whatever we conclude will only be our best guess. The process of getting to this point has an important effect on our thinking. As I’ve argued, the intentions of Stewart and (especially) Colbert are not as important as how they use staging, image, rhythm and our tacit memories of newscasters to outline perspectives in the media landscape. The second step in satirical process, in which the spectator is compelled to draw out potential meanings of the statement being heard, is perhaps the most critical. Because we do not know with certainty whether the statement is satirical as we experience it, we cannot be

sure that the speaker is conveying information ‘earnestly.’ A gap in knowledge emerges. As spectators, we scramble to fill this void with potential explanations. It’s better if we do not know where Colbert or Stewart are going because it gives us an opportunity to experiment in this virtual space of creativity. If the programs sign-posted when satire was approaching and then clarified what was intended for us to gather from that moment of satire, the effectiveness of the satire would be lost (and the shows would be decidedly less funny). Again, it is not unmasking that we are after. It is the moment of indecision, *an interstice of creative speculation*, in which the satirical content of the statement allows us to push the discursive boundaries surrounding the statement.

Because satire can often point toward beliefs and principles that are deeply held or taken for granted, the experience of it can sometimes be a shock to the system. As Connolly has noted, shocks can be useful. Self concurs: “Satire jars us out of complacency into a pleasantly shocked realization that many of the values we unquestioningly accept are false” (Feinberg 1967, 15-6; quoted in Self 2011, 69). Self concludes that the audience is persuaded toward the author’s position as a result of this shock, which he believes “create[s] a crack through which persuasion may appear” (69). I am less confident about her conclusion. Self believes that Stewart’s meaning is never stated, but always understood (68). This may be the case from time to time. But sometimes we *think* we know Stewart’s ‘actual’ position on an issue, and sometimes he wants us to think we do. He surprises us on occasion, too, when we think we know what his approach will be to a certain issue and he goes in a different direction. Sometimes we *can* guess where he’s going and we anticipate the joke, but the inability to consistently

pin the pundit to a position plays a major role on *The Daily Show*. It plays a much more prevalent role in *The Colbert Report*, and since Self's discussion is limited to *The Daily Show*, the disagreement is not as divergent as it may seem. Regardless, the importance of the shocks felt when we encounter satire is not that they *produce a predictable response or yield an intellectual conclusion* that we can anticipate. Rather, the importance is precisely the opposite: *A shock is a glancing blow with the virtual, the outcome of which cannot be deduced from the existing conditions*. A shock might be considered an intensive moment, in which the virtual begins to breach and become an actualized state. I agree with Self that satirical argument causes a reaction, and we can sometimes determine the specifics of this reaction after the fact. But believe the reaction cannot be predictably engineered through satire.

Newsness: Repetitive Satire and The Colbert Report

Aaron Hess (2011) also notes the role of the virtual in news parody. He locates the role of the virtual in the midst of *repetition*—repetition with difference. Stewart provides a space for something new, but through a repetition of the familiar:

Irony is the construction of discourse that means something different than and often contradictory to what is said. Parody...is understood as repetition with a difference, a wonderfully simple definition for a form that is exceptionally complex. The “difference” in the repetition is often constructed through the trope of irony. Finally, satire...is related to parody, but tends to carry an element of social critique through ridicule. (Hess 2011, 154-55)

Stewart is effective at “undermin[ing] and contest[ing] the established meanings and ideologies” of “dominant perspectives” because he deploys irony, satire, parody at different moments throughout his broadcast (Hess 2011, 155). Again, the prerequisite is that the spectator be well versed in how major media outlets present the news and have a certain familiarity with current events. When this is the case, Stewart’s broadcast will be, in some sense, a repetition of what the spectator already knows (160). The difference produced when Stewart essentially ‘repeats’ what others have already reported (or even *how* they have reported it) is what makes him successful (Ibid.). Stewart’s program is based on repetition, with a difference. This is why Stewart rarely ‘breaks’ news stories. Instead, he comments on how others present the news, re-presenting it to his spectators. Stewart’s broadcast can be read as a text in conversation with other ‘textual’ broadcasts, and this context is what reaches his audience: “audience foreknowledge of the text, or familiarity with the form or structure that is being parodied, becomes a precursor of success for the author of parody” (156).

Hess makes a case for this intertextual play producing a Deleuzian difference as it repeats, and he does so without claiming to know the effect of this repetition in advance. The answer to that is filled with uncertainty (Hess 2011, 159), which is why these techniques are important for destabilizing established ideologies. Attempting to do the same through a parallel and competing narrative structure—without parody and satire—is insufficient for effectively contesting this monopoly on news media. Repeating the news always includes the potential to draw new conclusions from reiterations of previous reports; we cannot draw the same from repetition. Newness is drawn from repetition.

I follow Hess to a point, but I also believe that Stewart is filling in a gap between traditional news outlets on the one hand and his former coworker Stephen Colbert on the other. If spectators encounter Stewart's re-presentation of familiar news stories, and then encounter them *again* during *The Colbert Report*, the ironic effect is operationalized in a new way. Stewart's message is often times more discernible or direct than Colbert's; he humorously explains how other news outlets are presenting information in a narrow or problematic way. He is critical of the way news is conveyed, particularly when he uses clips that call attention to these problems. But this sense becomes *actualized* thirty minutes later when we see Colbert *demonstrate* them in a *performative* way. Hess and Self miss the most important repetition with a difference: watching Colbert enact the news in a way that Stewart just upended through satirical argument. Colbert is the punch line to Stewart's setup.

A feedback cycle spins to life through the interaction of the 'three' elements: major news outlets present the news, Stewart shows clips and points out particular problems, Colbert exaggerates these modes of presentation. Once these elements are assembled, we see bits of Colbert in the performances of the official news media. We can speculate about how Stewart might ridicule a network's treatment of an issue because we can recognize the similarity between Colbert's approach and those being deployed on the news networks. The first repetition with a difference—the major news broadcasts to Stewart's treatment—sets up a second—the contraction of those two elements to Colbert's personification of those major news elements. Repetition with a difference in

this sense produces a moment of virtuality, a concept that can be expanded by tracking the role the virtual plays in cinema according to Deleuze (Deleuze 1995; 1989).

Cinematic Virtuality and the Zone of Indiscernibility

An image is capable of conveying something beyond what is initially caught in the frame, Deleuze argues in *Cinema 2* (1989). Moving images—film—can further enhance this effect. Viewers may ‘see’ something that is not visually represented. They may see something that is virtual, something that can only be detected indirectly or through its effects. Deleuze is most interested in the moment when the virtual is glimpsed. Like Sophoclean scenes that involve characters explaining what has taken place or satirical news programs that comment on others’ interpretations of the news, certain films and cinematic techniques invite the spectator to draw something creative from the content rather than conveying it explicitly. All three techniques require us to reach beyond the face value of what we sense. Borrowing from and extending Bergson’s work on time, Deleuze conceptualizes what he calls ‘crystals of time,’ in which certain scenes call our attention to the contraction of past, present, and future in a moment of duration. *Cinema 2* is also a productive resource for exploring the way Colbert and Stewart disrupt mainstream media strategies. By mapping a Deleuzian typography of film onto figures like O’Reilly, Stewart, and Colbert, a conception of virtuality in broadcast news emerges that is helpful for understanding these experimental media techniques. If

the goal is to invite creative actualization as a response to watching Comedy Central's portrayal of the news, Deleuze offers an analysis that gets us close to it.

For Deleuze, the process of actualization involves both the virtual and the actual—the tandem constitutes the genetic component of what we encounter in experience. To understand the virtual and the actual as distinct concepts is to misunderstand the process of actualization. One can never be found without the other. Each image of an (actualized) object has two sides—the real object being depicted, and the virtual image that is the depiction. But the two are related. The virtual image “envelops or reflects the real: there is a coalescence between the two. There is a formation of an image with two sides, actual *and* virtual” (Deleuze 1989, 68). The two form a circuit and contribute to our perception of the object, as that perception is further influenced by our “deeper and deeper layers of reality and higher and higher levels of memory or thought” (69). The virtual and actual are divisible in the object only in theory. The two are “running behind each other and referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility” (Ibid.). The point that they are circling—this point of indiscernibility—is the smallest, most contracted circle, in which we cannot determine whether what we are seeing is the virtual image chasing the actual, or vice versa. Deleuze calls this a crystal-image. The virtual does not become reducible to the actual in the crystal-image, nor is the reverse true. What we sense is an ambiguous multiplicity of virtuality and actuality.

In this framework, Colbert's ‘character’ opens a zone of indiscernibility, in which things are unclear. In Deleuze's terms, elements become ‘unattributable’ to Colbert's

actual intent, to his character, to the people he's mimicking, and to what we expect him to mean. His relationship with the pundits he is apparently ridiculing becomes fraught *if we understand one to be the actual image and one to be the virtual image*. Is O'Reilly the actual image being chased by Colbert's virtual image? Once connected, what does the circuit between the two bring to life? These questions point toward a zone of indiscernibility as a breeding ground for proto-ideas; the seeds of new ideas emerge from this foggy and collapsing space between the virtual and the actual. There is no 'actuality' in *The Colbert Report* that can be peeled off and analyzed on its own. It is always tied up with the virtual.

Accordingly, the effect of *The Colbert Report* is amplified by Bergson's understanding of memory and perception. In the preserved past, there are moments that are interpreted or recalled when triggered by another event experienced in the present. Bergson offers us a means of understanding this experience if we understand perception to involve our present recollection of moments in the past. For instance, seeing Colbert berate a guest or bully an interviewee who seems to be making a good case may trigger two or more sheets of time 'simultaneously': one, of laughter, as we realize with the guest that Colbert is performing in character, and second, that of another pundit on television who uses similar practices to get a point across (but who is not knowingly 'in character'). At times, the guest's frustration is palpable when Colbert is particularly acerbic, dense, or obtuse, even when it is clear he is performing in character. We recognize these tactics from their more earnest deployment on other networks, and the experience of seeing them recalls the affective tone of dialogue in which the interviewer

believes he or she is correct and eliminates any space for legitimate disagreement. Or, when Colbert makes hyperbolic claims about what groups are ‘ruining America’ or counts down the greatest ‘threats’ to America (the number one being, of course, grizzly bears, those ‘godless killing machines’), we experience the moment of satire in more than one way. It is recognizably satirical, and we are amused by the absurdity of it. But, we also perceive the way his segments look and sound like their non-satirical counterparts. When we hear O’Reilly talk about the culture wars between progressives and conservative traditionalists, in which the future of America will be won or lost, we may also hear Colbert’s threat-down siren in the back of our minds. Detecting these fear-based tactics on other networks is easier after seeing Colbert’s version on Comedy Central.

The circuit between such tactics being used in these two spaces can build a parallel circuit in the spectator who consumes both media. Once connected, in that zone of indiscernibility, the spectator may experience news programs differently as she draws on new resources for creative engagement with the content. New avenues of critical engagement may open up in this virtual space. A stronger feeling of skepticism may be nudged to the front when someone declares absolute certitude about a contentious position on the news. Alternative narratives to the ones being told may seem more plausible, even when they are dismissed or given short shrift on air. Creative new options and ideas may begin to congeal in those moments of indiscernibility. The experience of spectatorship may vacillate between all of these sensations and more when such a circuit is connected and activated.

The zone of indiscernibility is fertile ground for these experiences, because a ‘true’ interpretation of the ‘facts’ is never clearly distilled. From the ambiguity, spectators are given the opportunity to approach issues critically or with a new set of resources for forming ideas. Such an experience is compatible with what Deleuze calls a ‘third state’ in which something is caught in a transition from one state to another: “the crystal caught in its formation and growth [is] related to the ‘seeds’ which make it up. In fact there is never a completed crystal; each crystal is infinite by right, in the process of being made and is made with a seed which incorporates the environment and forces it to crystallize” (Deleuze 1989, 88). Feedback loops and fluctuating sheets of memory and experience become incorporated into the experience of the crystal, dynamically producing new interpretations of current and past experiences. As spectators, we participate in a multiplicity that is undergoing change. Incipience constitutes the trajectory of that change, but the results of these changes are not determinable in advance. They are traceable, but not predictable. Experimental techniques like the ones used on Comedy Central render more visible the circuit between news media and spectators; they loosen the authoritative grip on what is real and what is not. The political ideas that crystallize as a result of this media-based zone of indiscernibility have the potential to intervene at the level of idea formation, yielding creative responses to contemporary political problems.

On occasion, the pundits that Colbert mimics come on his show for an interview, which further extends the media circuit. The result is not always what you might expect. Despite countless accusations, Colbert’s character is insulated from attempts to ‘expose’ him as a liberal or to reveal his inauthenticity. Guests sometimes try to corner him into

admitting being a ‘fake,’ and demand that he reveal the authentic Colbert. Attempts like these miss the point of his approach, as well as Colbert’s disruptive rather than constructive role, but they persist anyway. His detractors light-heartedly push him into staking out ground, but they usually find that it is extremely difficult to ‘out-Colbert’ Stephen Colbert. In the end, they end up helplessly re-affirming the content of Colbert’s character. Bill O’Reilly *knows* that Colbert is ridiculing him and *The O’Reilly Factor*, but there is nothing he can do about it. Colbert enthusiastically affirms everything O’Reilly says, even when O’Reilly is critical of Colbert’s program. Colbert can always deny, dodge, and performatively confirm his stance as Stephen Colbert; O’Reilly can’t *prove* anything. There is no ‘actual’ to be found in Colbert without the ‘virtual.’ The ‘object’ that is *The Colbert Report* does not exist in isolation; it is a relational assemblage involving the rest of the media landscape. Because of this, the accusatory jabs fail to land, and end up propping up the character Colbert has designed and developed.

When Sophocles places some of the plays’ action off stage, described by figures involved in the drama, he invites spectators to get involved. He invites us to bring to bear our experience, our feelings, our memories, the information revealed, and our perceptual specificity in judging characters and their decisions. In short, Sophocles invites us to dwell in a zone of indiscernibility for a moment, where we too are unsure what the right decision is. As we become aware of the path that the plot is taking, we may grow frustrated when dominant characters confidently seal their fate through a few poor decisions. What we draw from his plays may be as much a product of what he conveys indirectly as it is of the words spoken. Like O’Reilly or Sean Hannity or Glen Beck or

Ann Coulter or Rush Limbaugh, Creon is certain of his circumstances and has determined the sole path forward. Those who disagree with him represent fundamental challenges to the truth, and therefore must be silenced or eliminated. Oedipus learned this lesson the hard way, in *Oedipus Rex*, when he discovered that he was unexpectedly wrong about important issues he felt sure about. He was shocked. *Sophocles implicitly tells his spectators what it feels like to have one's truths disruptively made contingent.* For the most hardheaded of his characters, the results are tragic.

The way in which Sophocles conveys this experience indirectly is an important component of his work. Several characters in his plays offer alternative accounts of the facts to the main characters (Tiresias to Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, or Haemon to Creon in *Antigone*), but the main characters remain unconvinced. Loosening one's truth requires more than a simple counter-story. It requires working on multiple layers to disrupt the status of 'truths' creatively. Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart provide contemporary examples of experimentally disrupting culturally embedded political frameworks through satire in a way that is akin to Sophoclean tragedy. Indeed, the seriousness of their satire may reside in the fact that they both convey a sense of tragic possibility, invoking it to challenge the modes of self-confidence, providence, and singular lines of progress embedded in the media. The tragic possibility is not one of cynicism or hopelessness, but of creative emergence. Comedy Central's effectiveness relies on the disruptive power of parody in combination with the creative potential stemming from zones of indiscernibility.

Conclusion:

The Way Things Are (Becoming)

Four separate but overlapping modes of agency have appeared in this study. On its own, each is insufficient for determining the most effective course of action in any set of circumstances. Taken together, there are compatibility concerns among the different modes. Each is a rough blueprint outlining an aspirational comportment for intervening in a world of becoming. Because our world is marked by periods of acceleration and increased fluctuation at several different registers, subjects devising ways to intervene in the action must be astute when selecting a strategy. And, because the world acts with and upon us even while we intervene, agency might be understood as navigating this configuration of us and/in the world. Such an interpretation involves an indirect mode of agency, in which subjects are neither sole actors nor the exclusive sources of intervention in a situation. If events are not definitively determined by a providential universe *or* by a mechanistic and universal set of natural laws, our role as actors is to play one part in the larger assemblage of human and non-human actors. As subjects, we are constituted by the world as we contribute to its constitution. Interventions in that world are products of their surroundings as well as sources for transformation on a wide variety of scales. Lucretius wrestles with these non-sovereign forms of agency as he tries to find space between determinism and an autonomous will:

So, you can see, motion begins with will
Of heart or mind, and from that will moves on

Through all the framework. This is not the same
As our advance when we are prodded on
Or shoved along by someone else's force.
Under those circumstances, it is clear
That all our substance moves against our will,
Violence-driven, till our purpose checks it.
A foreign force often propels men on,
Makes them go forward, hurries them pell-mell,
Yet you see, don't you, something in ourselves
Can offer this force resistance, fight against it,
And this resistance has sufficient power
To permeate the body, to check the course,
To bring it to a halt? (Lucretius 1968, 59)

The question mark concluding this passage reminds the reader that there is no guarantee that the will can overcome those forces that “prod us along.” The seat of action is also ambiguous: what is the “something in ourselves” that can resist these forces and “check the course” of events? If the neural network involves a degree of plasticity, and if effective interventions require attending to those registers of thinking beneath the intellectual register, agency involves something more capricious than definable. And if the goal of intervening is to shift the trajectory of existing forces in order to encourage a more favorable outcome, then determining the mode of agency that accords with the needs of that particular situation becomes critical to the success of the intervention. Counter-examples lend support to this claim: Creon's stubbornness invites his tragic end; Diamond's and Money's hurried and apodictic conclusions about the future of David/Brenda's gender leads to incredible hardship; FOX News' elimination of a middle ground frames a world of polemics rather than discussion.

In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli uses historical examples to support his claim that there is no single set of rules for proceeding when conditions and circumstances

fluctuate. Successfully determining what the next step is requires reading those circumstances carefully (but in a timely manner!) in order to devise a plan specific to such a scenario. Universal advice is unhelpful (and often counter-productive or dangerous) because it fails to consider the unique conditions of each situation. An effective prince will have and hone the ability to evaluate each situation, favoring an approach that is most apt to his conditions. Machiavelli points out instances when princes pay the ultimate price for having neglected to modify their approach to the particularities of a scenario. In these cases, they either failed to read the scene effectively, or were unable to develop a plan that suits that scene. Accordingly, a set of rules for princes to follow is always subordinate to changes in conditions and the modifications to those rules that must occur if the prince is to encourage a preferable outcome. Careful observation of fluctuating conditions and creative problem-solving are what keep a prince in power.

As a placeholder for those changes in circumstances that are outside of the prince's control, Machiavelli offers the term *fortuna*: that wily and uncontrollable force of accident and surprise that influences much of the way events unfold. Even the most powerful and clever prince cannot eliminate or control *fortuna*. It is an inescapable part of lived experience. But, if he is clever, he can plan for it, adapt to it, and change courses with it. The ability to do these three things is what Machiavelli calls *virtu*: the princely ability to navigate a world marked by *fortuna* (rather than attempting to stamp it out). In his estimation, *fortuna* is responsible for roughly half of everything that happens, while *virtu* is responsible for the remaining half (Machiavelli 1988, 85). Like Sophocles and Lucretius, Machiavelli is describing a non-providential world that also eludes human

mastery: “I am not unaware that many have thought, and many still think, that the affairs of the world are so ruled by fortune and by God that the ability of men cannot control them. Rather, they think that we have no remedy at all; and therefore it could be concluded that it is useless to sweat much over things, but let them be governed by fate.” Jocasta’s approach, in which she goes with the flow of changing circumstances because they are outside her control, resembles this position. Machiavelli ascribes the popularity of this view to the “great changes that have taken place and are still to be seen now”; changes “which could hardly have been predicted.” Such a deterministic view may be tempting because it relieves human actors of the exclusive responsibility to control the fate of events in their entirety (a tall order for even the most ambitious prince). But, Machiavelli resists conceding all action to the fate of the cosmos “so as not to eliminate human freedom” (Machiavelli 1988, 85).

By preserving an element of human freedom without characterizing the world as subject to human mastery or complete control, Machiavelli’s outlook offers an explanation for human events and incentivizes creative responses to fluctuating sets of circumstances. In a world partially constituted by forces outside our control, determining how and when to intervene is critical for encouraging a favorable outcome. Machiavelli illuminates how a course of events is not subordinate to even the most powerful leaders, and the acknowledgment of this fact helps the prince more effectively respond to shifts in the terrain. Sophocles illustrates what happens when actors refuse to change courses when new information comes to light or circumstances change. Lucretius does as well when he explains that stubborn oaks are ripped from the ground in a flood while flexible

shrubs bend with the water and retain their footing, or describes how sailors who refuse to slacken the sail in a gust of wind often find themselves in the water. Machiavelli encourages us to plan for the flood, even (or especially) when the weather is fair, and to respond quickly and creatively if it comes unexpectedly. When princes fail to account for the possibility of a change in circumstances, Machiavelli has little sympathy for them when *fortuna* rears its head: “[T]hose rulers who lost their principalities, after having ruled them for many years, should not lament their bad luck but should blame their own indolence. For in quiet times they never thought that things could change (it is a common human failing when the weather is fine not to reckon on storms)” (Machiavelli 1988, 84). Because we cannot halt the river, we must prepare for the flood (84-5). Even when preparations are insufficient for preventing another *fortuna*-based flood, they will almost always lessen the damage done when one comes (85). A clever prince makes arrangements and then prepares to adapt to new information or circumstances as they emerge.

If *The Prince* offers no hard and fast standards for action, then part of this *virtu* is the ability to determine if, when, and how to take action in each situation. In the context of this study, *virtu can be read as the ability to decide when to bend, when to engage, when to wait, and when to watch*, for “we are successful when our ways are suited to the time and circumstances, and unsuccessful when they are not” (Machiavelli 1988, 85). Each mode of agency outlined here may be appropriate at a given time but impotent at a different time. Choosing a strategy to deploy in relation to a particular set of conditions may be the difference between a successful intervention and an ineffective one. By tracing the changing trajectory of a course of action, and responding creatively to those

changes, an agent is more likely to influence a favorable outcome. Successful princes exemplify this skill. Those princes that fail to adapt fare poorly by comparison: “since circumstances vary and men when acting lack flexibility, they are successful if their methods match the circumstances and unsuccessful if they do not” (87).

To prescribe one mode of agency over the others in all cases is to misunderstand the relationship between those circumstances and the success of the agent’s intervention. An agent with *virtu* will select one or more modes of agency depending on which is/are most apt to the circumstances at hand. Machiavelli evaluates historical figures based on that criterion: was their mode of intervention (or lack thereof) appropriate for that instance? In some cases, a favorable outcome was the result even though it appears the actor lacked *virtu*, but this possibility is inevitable in a world governed in part by *fortuna*. Wisely selecting a mode of action does not guarantee that a sequence of events will unfold in congruence with an agent’s wishes, but it will increase that likelihood. Some princes get lucky even when they make bad decisions, and sometimes *virtu*-wielding princes get unlucky even when they seem to do everything right. In all situations, agents are only one part of the eventual outcome.

Advising a range of possible options for intervening in the world helps explain what some critics call contradictions in Machiavelli’s advice to the prince. There are times when Machiavelli recommends slow, patient courses of action; if “the times and circumstances change in ways for which his methods are appropriate, he will be successful” (85). If another man acts impetuously and is successful, this is because his ‘way’ “conform[s] with the conditions in which [he] operate[s]” (86). The most

consistent advice Machiavelli offers is that consistency is of little value in a world with *fortuna*.

In a letter to Giovan Battista Soderini in 1506, Machiavelli puzzles over the fact that although two different men pursue the same strategy, one succeeds and one fails. He notes that leaders who successfully implement a strategy are often praised when things turn out favorably but are criticized for failing when they implements the same strategy at another time. Other times, the failure will not be blamed on the leader at all, but on “the will of Heaven and a consequence of late fate” (98). *Fortuna* complicates and frustrates those seeking a universal set of standards for effective intervention, but it also intensifies the need for flexibility and adaptability in the face of unexpected changes. The ability to adjust on the fly to these fluctuations increases the chances of success, though it cannot guarantee it. If the four modes of agency developed here are best-suited to a fortuna-imbued world, and *virtu* is the ability to select a strategy a strategy for intervention that is fits the time and circumstances at hand, then perhaps Machiavelli’s work is the key to drawing these four modes of agency together.

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We inhabit an era of accelerated pace and a precarity of being that rivals vulnerabilities encountered regularly by the Greek polis. And yet our operative conceptions of political agency have yet to catch up with this condition. Drawing initially upon Sophocles and Lucretius, this study seeks to retune modern models of agency to fit the late-modern condition. As you work creatively upon Sophocles to appreciate the swerve in Lucretius, the wisdom of minor characters in his tragic trilogy becomes even more visible, particularly as they respond with flexibility and insight to surprising events and binds. We next turn to Catherine Malabou's exploration of body/brain "plasticity", to bolster and extend these insights. Friedrich Nietzsche is drawn upon to teach us the importance of periodic hesitation, as we allow multifarious intensities to work upon us in the hopes that a new, creative response will bubble up to respond to an uncanny event. The focus on flexibility, plasticity, periodic hesitation, creativity, and cultivation of existential gratitude is carried into contemporary life through an analysis of media techniques adopted by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. By parodying the rhythm, pace and tone of news programs, these commentators teach us both how the media work on the passive syntheses that infuse agency and how we can turn its operations into creative political thinking and action. The study ends by examining Machiavelli on the precarious relations between *virtu* and *fortuna* through the lens of these strategies, doing so to retune our practices of political agency.

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