Practice and Improvise: A Christian Response to the Politics of Morality[1]

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Over many years, American political theorist William E. Connolly has offered a sustained critique of the "politics of morality." Connolly made his case initially by attacking themes in the theological writings of Augustine of Hippo. In response to Connolly's initial challenge, this essay promotes a conception of Christian ethics that reflects other Augustinian themes than those Connolly resisted. Drawing on the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Sam Wells, I show how Christian ethicists have developed accounts of improvised responsibility. The essay concludes that such accounts are congruent with Connolly's vision of politics as critical pluralism based on agonistic respect.

For Richard R. Niebuhr

I

The pictures of responsibility that organize legal, ethical, and political theories are themselves of political consequence. Christian theology is a reservoir of such pictures, and Augustinian theology is of particular importance in this regard. To the extent that contemporary ethical and political theories envision citizens who are responsible to ideals of autonomy and free choice, they throw off conceptual shadows that cast into darkness those persons who cannot rise to the occasions that such responsibility demands. Christian theologians have opposed modern conceptions of responsibility that disavow the imponderability of human involvement in sin. A political theory of democracy, for example, that emphasizes interests, liberties, reasonableness, and free choice glides smoothly over various kinds of human indigence. Deliberative

democratic theory—which has gripped American political and legal theorists, in some version or other, for more than four decades—appears, at least from an Augustinian view, to misapprehend the beings it describes.

American political theorist William E. Connolly has sustained a constant critique of deliberative conceptions of responsibility. Connolly made his case initially by attacking themes in the theological writings of Augustine of Hippo. For those of us who find in Augustine a searing image of the obsessions and lapses of an evidently unstable will, Connolly's attack may seem ironic. Augustine was uneasy with an account of free will as the bright lever of choice, and his uneasiness grew with maturity. His doctrine of original sin postulated an innate defect in the will, so that, while it operates as a chooser, it seems to be deprived of its original compass in God. Perhaps we can stipulate that "the politics of morality"—to use Connolly's phrase—are indigenous to Augustinian terrain. Whenever we ponder the obscurity of motives, the moronic compulsiveness of desire, or the singe of remorse, we are on terrain that Augustine in some ways delimited for us. Connolly organized his thinking by attacking Augustinian rigor. Yet, in response to Connolly's challenges, in the second part of my paper, I will promote a picture of *improvised* responsibility that draws on other Augustinian themes.

II

In 1969, Connolly aimed his "critical temper" at contemporary theories of pluralist democracy that described American politics as sustained competition among coherent groups, with government serving as the arena and/or umpire of contest and adjudication (Connolly 1969). This pluralist theory tended to assume or assert that citizens' involvement in competing groups enabled them to develop the personal capabilities to engage in public deliberative processes. Citizens would then bring these capabilities into the public political forum in order to negotiate reasonable basic institutions and laws. Theorists recommended this picture of pluralist democracy as being more stable and less violent than its predominant contrast-model, which was authoritarian or totalitarian government.

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* was published in 1971. Its huge influence would cement the terms that Connolly had adumbrated in 1969 as the putative orthodox hermeneutics for interpreting American democracy. Yet Connolly had already found it imperative to disrupt them. In *The Terms of Political Discourse*, he analyzed pluralist accounts of "power," "responsibility," and "the idea of freedom" (Connolly 1974). His purpose there was to politicize these key terms in order to loosen the authority of liberal contract theory over their proper use. Connolly has never aimed to undercut democratic pluralism, but rather to deepen it, to theorize it in ways that are more fitting to the kind of ambiguous beings we are and to the complex contingencies in which we live.

In *Identity/Difference* (1991), Connolly's critical temper found a new "contrast-model," which he came to call "the Augustinian Imperative." In writing *Identity/Difference*, Connolly was spurred by a thinker he intensely disliked, but whose intellectual and rhetorical abilities nonetheless commanded his respect. Rather than mask the intensity of his dislike, he explored its sources in his "Letter to Augustine," the final chapter of *Identity/Difference*. The epistolary form allowed Connolly to make a direct attack. To Augustine, he wrote:

> I admire your willingness to interpret the other openly from your own vantage point. It relieves you from the modern tendency to insinuate one's deepest prejudices into charitable interpretations of the other.
>
> (Connolly 1991, 124)

Connolly's interpretation of Augustine was not charitable; instead, it dramatized the difficulties of agonistic respect through Connolly's self-conscious indulgence in the temptations of enmity.

Connolly put some fierce charges to Augustine. But, in doing so, he wanted to expose shadow-concepts that fall alongside every theory of free will. In *Identity/Difference*, he argued that there is a persistent instability in the conceptions of responsibility that Western political and legal theories espouse. These theories require supplementary concepts to catch the disturbing energies that would otherwise compromise our picture of ethics as fidelity to principle. So, we may observe, the freedom of the will must stand out against the background of original sin;

the categorical imperative must stand out against the opacity of passions; virtuous character must stand out against psychic abnormality; free choice stands out against our manipulated appetites. We cannot think too far in the direction of a deliberative theory of responsibility without coming across the need for these shadow-concepts. Or rather, there is something inhumane about any theory that tries to eschew them.

For example, however much we respect legal definitions of sanity, there is something horrible about the incarceration of the mentally ill, who are competent to stand trial, but whose deterioration in prison is often extreme. A woman convict, in Iowa, while serving her sentence, has on two separate occasions gouged out each of her eyes. A male prisoner in Ohio opens slits in his arms and then pushes tooth-brushes up under the skin. These reports alone chasten one's feeling of the adequacy of our criteria of responsibility. Yet the same unease can be raised in relation to many convicts whose choices were drowning in addictions, intolerable frustrations, or lifelong grief when they formed an intention to do a criminal act. The most unsettling criminal cases occur where the seam between the choices of the accused and demonic energies that surround them cannot be made out with any clarity.[2] It is perhaps not so very different in the cases of those of us who manage to stay out of jail. We require some shadow-concept to mitigate the idea of *mens rea* as the source of our actions—to contain the baffling energies that crystallize around it.

Connolly attacked Augustine because he considered that Augustine's account of human responsibility for evil called forth the shadow-concept of original sin. Connolly charged further that Augustine's belief that the perversion of free will must be commensurable with the brokenness of the world masked Augustine's bitterness at the real state of things. Augustine imagined a world responsive to human intention and choice. It was, in Connolly's perspective, a fantastic denial of the insecure connection between our principled actions and their ultimate effects. Yet because Augustine believed that God is omnipotent and perfectly good, he could not acknowledge such insecure connections to be part of the fabric of creation. So, in Connolly's view, Augustine

loaded responsibility for evil onto human choices. The question of atonement for evil, then, became acute. A human victim was required, a scapegoat who could bear the unbearable incommensurability between human responsibility and the extent of evil in the world. From Connolly's perspective, there is no historical evidence to support the Christian claim that only one victim was required.

It must be said that Connolly's critique of Augustine was primarily addressed to contemporary political theorists. Connolly wanted to show how the picture of deliberative responsibility invites citizens to project shadow-concepts onto others so that the responsible citizen who is capable of sustaining inalienable rights can be distinguished from minorities, addicts, aliens, prisoners, poor mothers, children, debtors, demoniacs, homeless, mentally ill, mentally anguished, unemployed, uninsured, and those who have been maimed one way or another. These others fail to reach the requirements of citizenship of pluralist democracies because they cannot participate in its deliberative processes. Connolly argued that it is our conceptions of responsibility that work to disenfranchise these others. In *Identity/Difference*, he urged, therefore, that we conceptualize politics as the means to contest against deliberative pictures of responsibility.

In *The Augustinian Imperative: Reflections on the Politics of Morality*, Connolly established Augustine as the rival to Connolly's own "critical pluralism" or "politics of generosity" (Connolly 2002a). Connolly conceived of agonistic generosity as "a social relation of respect for the opponent against whom you define yourself" (Connolly 2002a, 155). He envisioned agonistic respect as a relation both more generous and more perilous than liberal tolerance. Such respect "cuts" deeper, Connolly wrote, because it avows the "interdependence and strife" through which rival identities reciprocally inform and transform each other.

Connolly construed Augustine's strategies for consolidating orthodox identity as the *prototype* of negative political differentiation. Heresies, he argued, are options that emerge within communities of shared faith; but the pursuit of these options by some of the faithful become politically threatening when they disturb "the highest hope the authoritative doctrine is designed to sustain" (Connolly 2002a, 78). Threatening op-

tions within the shared faith must then be defeated. If they cannot be defeated, the persons who propose them must be made aversive: that is, they must be heaped with invective that makes their ideas seem not just implausible but also shameful. Connolly used Augustine's thought in order to delineate the process of negative differentiation that produces identities that are rigorously responsible to truth and goodness. Orthodox identities that are so rigorously responsible require defenses against those energies that persistently harass and disturb them. Paradoxically, then, a rigorously responsible identity becomes fissured with habits of cruelty, incuriosity, animosity, and vindictiveness. It is an identity that must cope with challenges to its integrity through overt or covert violence.

Yet, we can observe, this picture of orthodox identities is overdrawn. On the contrary, there are uneven intensities to orthodox identities that may complicate the process of negative differentiation. The intensity of a belief for orthodox identities does not depend upon its coherence with other beliefs, but rather on its indispensability to life. The beliefs that seem indispensable to one generation may be mouthed as enchanting formulae in another. Some beliefs are enchanting; some are incorporated into our practical capabilities. Indispensable beliefs are those that organize actual priorities one day at a time.

Connolly identified the doctrine of salvation as Augustine's highest hope. But what if Augustine's most intense beliefs were expressed in his practical capabilities for leadership, spiritual direction, political activism, and the demands of living in a religious community? What if his belief in love animated the demeanor of his body with more intensity than his belief in the eternal damnation of sinners? What if his belief in the doctrine of grace, expressed through looks and gestures, were more legible to his contemporaries than the doctrine of original sin? We would have to reconstruct the differential intensities of Augustine's beliefs by inference from the daily practices he sustained, with great diligence and tact, of friendship, of worship, of pastoral care, of prayer and confession, of prodigious correspondence with others. Such differential intensities make an orthodox identity dynamic, animating the irony and perception, for example, that informed Augustine's own

political interventions in cases of capital punishment. To attend to the uneven intensities of belief makes conceptual room for the dynamism of orthodox identities, their differentiation from *and* responsiveness to the excluded others.

Belief and action are never mechanically related: their connection is expressed more often as a form of *tact* than fidelity to principle. Thus, in responding to Connolly's account of the Augustinian Imperative, I want to hold open the visceral plenitude of orthodoxy that is never exhausted by negative political differentiation. So below I will advance a picture of improvised responsibility that draws on *other* Augustinian themes, in particular, *ascesis* (training), faith, and grace. I organize my constructive remarks under the rubric: practice and improvise.

III

As we move our thinking about responsibility towards practice and improvisation, the texture of agency thickens and expands. It thickens into what Connolly has called the "visceral register"—those somatic markers of perception and feeling that guide and support our choices. It expands into a community that conscientiously shares its life together. The term practice resonates, of course, with currents in Christian ethics, but also with Connolly's own most recent work in *Neuropolitics* (2002b) and *Pluralism* (2005). The shift to practice not only highlights the significance of the visceral register for ethics; it allows that that register can be trained through exercise. Practice involves our tacit avowal that freedom gathers in us, if at all, as "time in the incarnation of habit," to use James Wetzel's phrase (Wetzel 1992, 138). Practice takes time; or rather, practice gathers time into the visceral register of our being. To avow this suggests how intensities of belief can be unevenly energized and realized in various social or historical contexts. Some beliefs become the capabilities we draw upon in ordinary or extraordinary circumstances, whereas other beliefs release only the mild illumination of a fantasy, what Iris Murdoch called a "dream-like facility" (Murdoch 1983, 44). Practice is the way we incorporate beliefs into our total style of being.

A picture of improvised responsibility can draw on Christian tradi-

tions of *ascesis*—without necessarily taking over invective against the flesh as the ubiquitous shadow-concept to spirit. The tradition of the desert ascetics, for example, is remarkably unruffled by the indigence of the will. Monks made alarming deviations from their path, but were restored to it with guidance that fostered more resilience than reproach. Responsibility in the ascetic tradition is understood to express no more and no less than the daily reprieve that enables a selfish man to rise to receive his small portion with gratitude. The ascetic tradition reduces the operatic complexities of the will to mundane situations of hunger, lust, anger, boredom, anxiety, envy, or exhaustion. It teaches ascetics to meet these unspectacular situations with a tender but hourly resolve. Such practice allows us to become acquainted with the energies that surround our choices—greed, grief, anger, attraction, envy, empathy—to befriend some of these as sources of new insight and possibility, to resist others gently and rhythmically so that we do not inadvertently strengthen them through fierce struggle. Practice allows these energies to become familiar, to give them direction where possible, or at least to exorcise their fascination through the banal means of getting used to them. The point is to develop capabilities that we want to take on a life of their own at those times when we are overwhelmed by uncertainty or anguish.

   To participate in liturgies of worship was a crucial practice for Augustine. Liturgical traditions structure and enrich imagination; they create an oscillation between the practices of our personal embodiment and our social incorporation into the Body of Christ. Our participation in worship is a mode of submission. There is a kind of powerlessness that is the foundation of worship, a surrender of the self-centered noise of inquiry and deliberation. In liturgy, we enter into a temporally and viscerally saturated space and ask God to recreate life in us. We are immersed with others in sensory experiences, in choreographed movements, in stories that are told again and again, and all of these things are synchronized with rhythmic turns through spaces and seasons. Liturgical practice layers belief in us through exercise in different moods and weather. Our beliefs are apprehended in the dimensions of space and time, known better, with less alarm at their maverick intensities and enlightenments. Liturgical discipline disabuses us of the idea that free-

dom is about spontaneous choice. Liturgy rather promotes a picture of freedom that entails duration and endurance. Both of these entailments can help us bear with humility but without reactive self-loathing the unforeseen consequences of our responsible actions in the world.

Let me give two examples of Christian ethicists who have systematically developed pictures of improvised responsibility. In his 1960 Robertson Lectures, H. Richard Niebuhr developed what he called a Christian ethics of responsiveness (Niebuhr 1963). Niebuhr set aside the predominant teleological and deontological pictures of moral man, urging that Christian life must have its own ethical "style." That style could not be assimilated to the picture of "man-the-maker" fostered by teleological concepts or by "man-the-citizen" fostered by deontological concepts. Rather, Niebuhr pictured "man-the-answerer" fostered by Christian faith in the sovereign and gracious God. Niebuhr offered a picture of improvised responsibility, where individuals must respond to actions upon them in anticipation of a response to their responses. Responsibility is therefore exercised in the *imaginative* task of interpreting the actions of others, and in the *practical* task of acting so as to welcome others' responses to an action. Situations of social emergency and personal tragedy have particular weight in Niebuhr's account. Our tact is tested most severely where our deliberations are most uncertain.

The finest contemporary exemplification of Christian "response ethics," however, is Sam Wells' *Improvisation* (Wells 2004). Wells argues for a picture of improvised responsibility through an extended exploration of the methods of improvisational theatre companies. The picture he develops is always fundamentally social and ecclesial. It demands the imaginative responsiveness that becomes possible among individuals who have trained with each other to improvise on a shared narrative whose outcome no one controls. In an improvised drama, players make offers to each other in order to develop the plot that unfolds among them. Players can either "accept" or "block" other players' offers. Accepting means responding to the others' initiative in ways that enliven the premise of the offer and allow the story to move forward. Blocking means refusing the premise of the offer, and preventing that particular unfolding. Christians, Wells avows, must strive to create communities

that enable people to accept all offers.

To be faithful means that the principle that imbues our responsiveness should be, to use Augustine's famous phrase, "whatever is, is good." To be church means forming ourselves into communities whose practices and liturgies enable us to respond to all offers with creative faith. But what then of evil offers? What about dangerous offers? In Christian communities, Wells observes, there are usually three kinds of reasons that people give for "blocking" an offer: "They tend to see saying 'Yes' as impossible, improper, or dangerous" (Wells 2004, 103). In such cases, Wells recommends a strategy of "overaccepting," which is to say of allowing gracious imagination and response to defeat the premise of the evil offer.

Consider an example. After the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote a little book called *Writing in the Dust* (Williams 2002). Williams personally experienced the bravery and care that ordinary people offered one another on that terrifying morning in Manhattan. He later read the accounts of phone calls that people made from the towers and planes to say good-bye to loved ones. He holds up for reverence these simple, practiced responses of love and courage that doomed people made in the face of anguish. Williams makes no excuse for the attacks, but in his response he defeats the premise of the terrorist's offer by finding the gifts that were offered in abundance in the midst of it. He "overaccepts," so that the ordinary responsiveness of the victims becomes the meaningful offer in the story.

Practice is the rigor that gives improvisers the resilience to sustain pliant moves. As Williams observes, "The hardest thing in the world is to know how to act so as to make the difference that *can* be made" (2002, 47). Such practical knowledge is a kind of discretion that appears in the moment of dread. As Williams puts it:

> We can cling harder and harder to the rock of our threatened identity—a choice, finally, for self-delusion over truth; or we can accept that we shall have no ultimate choice but to let go, and in that letting go, give room to what's there around us—the sheer impression of the moment, the need of the person next to you. (2002, 59)

We practice in order to sustain the moments of "letting go."

Thus, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, the dust that blanketed Wall Street recalled to Williams a "stray story" of Christ: Imagine a circle of righteous, angry men, with a convicted sinner at bay, and God on their side. "What do you say?" they ask the young rabbi, and Jesus responds: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8.3–11). For a moment, those of us whose imaginations are trained to these words will picture Jesus crouching down in the silence that follows, writing in the dust. Then one by one, the righteous men put down their stones and walk away (Williams 2002, 77–78).

IV

Following his earliest contest with Augustine, Connolly advocated an ethical-political spirituality that could challenge "the politics of morality" (Connolly 2002a, 151–58). In particular, he looked towards a politics that would be responsive, daring, and based in practices of generosity and agonistic respect. If his own engagement in such politics was initially contra-Augustinian, that should not determine the terms in which we infra-Augustinians engage Connolly (Skerrett 2004). Rather, we turn to Augustine and the Augustinian tradition with a sense of the plenitude that sustains the great theologian's interest for us. Connolly's initial "harsh" reading of him can offer provocation to readings that energize efficacious beliefs around other strands of Augustine's theology and discipline. But the efficacy of such beliefs comes, not from a more authoritative exposition, but from our whole style of ethical being. The rubric of practice and improvise draws on Augustinian themes: the priority of grace, the perversity of the will, the inscrutable depths of scripture, and the Church as the Body of Christ. These themes move us away from a fundamentalist morality towards an ethical sensibility that responds rather than decides. In that responsiveness, there is room for Christians to engage a politics of critical pluralism that joins generosity with agonistic respect.

In a pluralist democracy, Christians can buttress pictures of deliberative responsibility, or we can model practices of improvised responsibility. The deliberative pictures lead frequently, if not inexorably, to the

failures Connolly has exposed—the need for a shadow-concept, the temptation to project that shadow-concept onto others, hypocrisy and pandering within the moral community, invective and violence against its outsiders, and, finally, the subliminal doubt that God is neither sovereign nor gracious. Further, such a picture tends to buttress those reactions we make to strife that merely demonstrate to ourselves our power in the world. They are aimed at making a righteous response, rather than a response that makes the difference that can be made.

Yet, insofar as the ethos of practice and improvise is properly an ecclesial ethics, as Wells insists, it is not perforce universal. It is not supposed to be. But that does not make it any less pertinent to the politics of pluralist democracies. For, as H. Richard Niebuhr argued, the judgment that guides our responsiveness is not, To what principle or purpose are we accountable, but rather, To what community? And, for Niebuhr, as for Wells, Christian responsiveness must be accountable to "the universal society of being" encompassed in time by the promise of everlasting life (Niebuhr 1963, 107). So, if this style of ethics is not meant to be universal, it is nonetheless radically catholic.

In that regard, Wells commends the improvisational technique of reincorporating elements that have been let down or left behind. He urges that this technique is especially important to Christians. The technique of reincorporation incites us to envision the practical redress of negative political differentiation. For whatever has been disavowed, abandoned, or rejected as unclean must be finally reincorporated in the kingdom of God. Thus, a community that works to accept all offers is one that will be attuned to the rejected and the outcast. It will look into the shadow-concepts of its pictures of responsibility in order to reincorporate and remake whatever rejected elements have been sequestered there. And it will do this modestly, without extraordinary power, as it becomes the obvious thing to do.

To contest a rival demands that one practice and improvise the picture of responsibility one affirms. Others have pointed out to me the dangers of "over-acceptance" in my engagement with Connolly's attack on Augustine. Yet improvisation demands that we learn to discern the gift in the offer another makes, even in a rival offer, and so respond.

To act responsibly in this way means to act towards the difference that *can* be made; it is an open-ended and vulnerable pursuit. In so doing, though, we hope to align our responsiveness with the generosity enfolded in Augustine's maxim: "Love, and do what you will."

End Notes

1. I presented an early version of this paper at the Augustine and Politics Conference, February 24, 2006, at Villanova University. My thanks to Peter Busch for inviting me to speak there, to Greg Hoskins for helping me to get there, and to other participants in the conference for inspiring conversations, especially Peter Busch, Todd Breyfogle, Catherine Conybeare, Eric Gregory, Chuck Mathewes, Fr. Tom Martin, Joseph Prud'homme and Jim Wetzel. Fundamentally, though, this paper reflects so much that I learned from Richard R. Niebuhr many years ago at Harvard Divinity School. I dedicate it to him with love.

2. In a 2005 Frontline program, "The New Asylums," it is estimated that there are a half million people in American prisons who have been diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. Often these people end up in maximum-security institutions as a result of their disciplinary infractions within the penal system. One of the most terrible images for me in the documentary is of "group therapy" in which imprisoned men, each in his own individual cage, respond to their earnest psychiatrist. Documentary broadcast March 21, 2006 on Iowa Public Television. See www.pbs.org.

3. For an account of Augustine's political activism against capital punishment, see Dodaro 2005.

4. The context of this maxim is Augustine's reflection on the proper disposition required to admonish others in *The Rule of St. Augustine*, translated in G. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule*, cited in Martin 2005, 182. Thomas F. Martin, O.S.A., argues that Augustine's ideal vision of political community was set out in his monastic writings. See Martin 2005, 165–86.

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