Ruth Leys starts with accounts that reduce emotion to a few simple states and emphasize the degree to which it is genetically wired (see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 [Spring 2011]: 434–72). She then argues that other cultural theorists who emphasize the role of affect are driven in this direction, too, even when they wish to avoid such a trajectory. Much of the argument revolves around the charge of “anti-intentionalism” against us. Because of limitations of space, my response concentrates on my own thinking in this domain, though I suggest some lines of connection to other theories of affect. I will not always try to unpack Leys’s views but will focus more on where mine deviate from her account of them.

**Beyond Evolutionary Functionalism**

Leys often mentions in passing thinkers such as Henri Bergson, William James, Gilles Deleuze, and Alfred North Whitehead, to whom the “new” theorists of affect purport to be indebted. But she does not tell us what she herself thinks of the former. That is unfortunate. For they advance views about the biocultural organization of affect, a half-second delay in the organization of perception, time as becoming in a universe that is open to some extent, and real creativity in human thinking as well as elsewhere in the universe. Since each view helps to constitute the others, a reading of affect theory needs to take that interdependence into account. I note two issues here.
All of the above, while impressed with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, resist a simple functionalist reading of evolution; the later figures also oppose strong theories of genetic determination. They contend that a host of force fields participate to varying degrees in the processes of real creativity that mark species evolution and the larger universe as well. No system is closed, including that of species evolution. Whitehead, Bergson, and Deleuze are particularly insistent in this regard, and Deleuze draws upon biological research on gene “expression” to support his view.¹

None of the above thinkers nor, to my knowledge, any theorists discussed after the first few pages of the Leys’s essay think that emotions are few in kind or simply determined genetically. To me, the variations and complexity of emotion—which itself involves rich mixtures of affective energy and intersubjective processes—varies significantly from culture to culture and time to time. Recent neuroscience research on the plasticity of brain processes is compatible with such a reading. There are, of course, neuroscientists who advance a more closed reading as they pursue an autonomous science. I am interested, however, in those who seek productive interfaces with cultural theory in which each makes a contribution to the other. It is through such open exchanges that progress is most likely. Or, at least, that is my wager.

The second point is that Friedrich Nietzsche, James, Whitehead, and Bergson all projected something close to a half-second delay in the consolidation of perception and intention, well before Benjamin Libet attempted to clock it. Each devised different tests to support that view, but all moved in the same direction. Moreover, such a view also seems to be implied in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of the human perception of depth. So this issue is not one that only comes to cultural theory from the outside.

**Intentionality and Consciousness**

I concur with Whitehead and the contemporary biologist Stuart Kauffman about intentionality. Neither erases intentionality or agency from the

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¹. For one recent example of work indebted to Darwin, Bergson, and Deleuze that exceeds a narrow functionalist reading of biological evolution, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York, 2008).

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human estate. Indeed, Whitehead and Kauffman extend some degree of agency and intentionality well beyond the human estate. That move forms part of their thinking about those strange moments of real creativity that emerge periodically when dissonant modes of agency encounter one another. Kauffman thus finds a bacterium to possess some degree of agency. It is attracted to sugar; it pursues it as an aim; it adjusts its course to pursue that end, and it feels satisfaction when it achieves the end intended. In these respects it is unlike a ball rolling down a hill. “Let us stretch and say it is appropriate to apply it [action and agency] to the bacterium. We may do so without attributing consciousness to the bacterium. My purpose in attributing actions (or perhaps better, proto-actions) to a bacterium is to try to trace the origin of action, value, and meaning as close as I can to the origin of life itself.”

He and Whitehead—though he is probably not acquainted with Whitehead’s work—contend that attributions of degrees of agency beyond the human estate help us to grasp how human agency has evolved, to appreciate how internally complex and dependent upon external aids human agency is, and to cultivate our latent powers of ecological sensitivity.

Of course, a bacterium is not conscious. I join Whitehead and Kauffman in breaking the previous identity between consciousness and intention as we extend degrees of agency beyond the traditional nature/culture divide. Consciousness now becomes a more modest power than it is in the Cartesian and (though less so) Kantian and neo-Kantian traditions. Human agency expresses considerable complexity, though if Bonnie Bassler is correct the “collective agency” of bacteria is both essential to it and sometimes brings it to its knees. What are a few differences? Humans can ponder desires, emotions, and beliefs already there and explore ways to test or revise them. We can enter into new relations to adjust our established tendencies of action. We can also act tactically upon ourselves to alter intentional dispositions that resist reflexive revision. And others can act tactically upon us as individuals and constituencies. The points to focus on now are, first, that intentional tendencies emerge through a history of exchanges between an open, layered body/brain network and the wider

2. Stuart Kauffman, Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion (New York, 2008), p. 78. In one chapter he speculates that the human brain is a quantum system, more specifically, an open system that oscillates between quantum and stable states. Such a combination, he thinks, is most compatible with the experience of real creativity in human thinking; see ibid., pp. 197–229.

culture; second, that a specific intention on the way is often replete with pluripotentiality; and, third, that our consciousness plays a less consummate role in its consolidation than it typically credits itself for doing. These tendencies to inflation can be relieved through activities of meditation, an enriched image of language, and attention to the third-person observations of neuroscience. Leys seems to concur with the point about consciousness. If she does, we need to hear more about what the defining marks of “intentionalism” are in her view and what exactly makes affect theory “anti-intentionalist.” Consciousness, again, arrives at a late point in the consolidation of intention, even though, as Bergson emphasized, action-oriented perception understandably tends to locate it at the starting point.4

Affect and Emotion

Emotion and affect are essentially interinvolved, and neither is entirely reducible to the other. (Few theorists in this field accept the straitjacket imposed by the analytic/synthetic dichotomy upon which early analytic philosophy was founded, and we appreciate how this shift weakens the ability to attribute “performative contradictions” to intellectual adversaries.) Each layer of the body/brain system enters into bumpy communications with others through a rapid series of crossings and feedback loops. At the infrasensible level, below feeling and awareness, fast moving, coarse ideational intensities are not typically available to direct intellectual scrutiny or control. (I say “typically” because of that zone of mediation between the fastest and slowest processes which opens the door to fugitive experience.) Affective flows can be observed by detection devices invented by neuroscientists such as imaging, skin conduction tests, blood flows, and so on. Those observations tell us what zones of the body/brain system are excited, but they do not specify the contents. One example of a productive interface between phenomenology and neuroscience occurred several years ago when the Dalai Lama and Buddhist monks with refined sensory capacities entered into exchanges with neuroscientists.5 Neither party, by

4. I discuss connections between Whitehead and Kauffman in chapter 1 of A World of Becoming (Durham, N.C., 2011). The next chapter seeks to show supporters of Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty respectively how much they need each other. That effort is bolstered by the fact that Merleau-Ponty explicitly moved closer to the position of Whitehead about asymmetries of nature and nature/culture imbrications in his last work. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, Ill., 2003).
5. See Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama, ed. Francisco J. Varela (Somerville, Mass., 1997). Varela, before he died, pursued exchanges between neuroscience experiment and cultural experience. In this case his explorations of lucid dreaming and other practices drew the refined sensory life of monks into contact with the
the way, denied intentionality. Indeed, the exploration of lucid dreaming involved the use of imaging devices and eye signals from the dreaming monks. Such an interchange nourishes the idea that priming your dreams before going to bed can affect your mood or thinking the next day—a tactic of the self. For perception, intention, consciousness, emotion, and belief are preceded and touched by ideationally imbued flows that exceed, nourish, or trouble them. Creative thinking itself profits from such an uncanny interplay.

**Some Ethico-political Stakes**

There is reason to believe that conscious judgments of many about race, gender, sexuality, violence, and/or ecology stand in some tension with affect-imbued tendencies that nudge us in different directions. It is, among other things, those latter dimensions that right-wing activists seek to tap and activate. Of course, mothers, teachers, Augustinians, psychoanalysts, advertisers, film directors, and political consultants have experimented on this front for a long time. That is one reason there is so much attention to film by the carriers of affect theory. Besides attending to several films in *Neuropolitics*, for instance, I also discuss possible modes of exchange between Freudian theory and this perspective.⁶

The radical expansion of the mass media adds urgency to this issue. Media mixtures of noise, rhythm, image, concept, and music touch the infrasensible register as they also convey conscious judgments. That register, again, precedes, augments, or intensifies the others in *something* like the way the subaudible vibrations of organ music infuse the composition of moods without themselves being felt. If there is never a vacuum on the infrasensible register of subjective and intersubjective life—indeed, thinking, perception, and emotion would hardly be possible if there were—then it is important for egalitarians and pluralists who care about the future to observational practices of neuroscience. For him, dreams are not only experiences to interpret. They can be primed to make a productive contribution to our moods and creative powers.

⁶. See Connolly, “Memory Traces, Mystical States, and Deep Pluralism,” *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis, 2002), chap. 5. There I embrace Freud’s reading of memory traces as intentionally imbued fragments from the past that enter into resonance with other elements during defining moments, and I resist his attempt to link those traces to a primordial scene of violence. Also, I know from experience that some interpretive theorists conclude that those who focus on affect must, for that reason, have a blunt theory of language. So I pose that question to myself in the book, linking a discussion of affect to an intersubjective, expressive conception of language. When it comes to arts of the self that work on the infrasensible register I am interested in how discursive practices and nondiscursive techniques interact.
intervene productively in media politics. Recent work in aesthetic theory explores such intersections, but pursuit of new interfaces between neuroscience and cultural life is highly pertinent, too.\(^7\)

Today, the radical Right is more effective at micropolitics—multimodal, media work on the infrasensible register of constituencies—than the democratic Left. Too many of the latter seem to assume either that policy discourse is sufficient to politics, or that work on the affective register must be confined to individual therapy, or that only the talking cure is relevant to nonconscious processes, or that attention to affect must mean the denial of intentionality, or that interchanges with neuroscience will swallow cultural theory whole, or that cultural theory can be entirely sufficient to itself even though humans are densely embodied beings, or, especially, that every intervention of this sort must be manipulative. But if there is never a vacuum on the infrasensible register, if it has an intersubjective dimension, and if right-wing news, think tanks, and electoral campaigns play relentlessly upon it, then it is imperative to *stretch* conceptions of politics and ethics in this direction without eliminating the others.

But how can you participate in such practices without replicating the worst manipulative strategies of the Right? You can, first, expose through parody and example the tactics of those who promote a violent, exclusionary politics. You can, second, introduce counterstrategies of micropolitics attached to a more generous ethico-political agenda. And you can, third, publicize the latter experiments as you proceed, suggesting how they impinge upon the rich, affective dimensions of life. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert make a start on the first front and perhaps to some degree on the others as well. It seems unwise to ignore the infrasensible dimension of politics in an era of twenty-four hour news, an American regime increasingly resentful about its place in the world, and large sections of the population primed to respond aggressively to any scandal invented by bloggers and Fox News.

**Neuroscience/Phenomenology Interfaces**

Ruth Leys criticizes some neuroscientists, invoking others to help. It is not clear, however, whether any make a positive contribution to her image of culture. Speaking for myself, there are several candidates. I count Kauff-

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7. See, by way of exemplification, Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010). There are many others. My essay, “Experience and Experiment,” *Daedalus* 135 (Summer 2006): 67–75, explores both reflexive relations between self-interpretation and third-person accounts and modes of tactical action upon ourselves in light of such accounts. Of course, the movement must work in the other direction, too.
man, V. S. Ramachandran, Antonio Damasio, Giacomo Rizzolatti, and Francisco Varela among them. When one becomes too reductionist in this or that domain, I challenge that tendency. Damasio, for instance, conveys too functionalist a reading of evolution and too restricted a notion of emotion, even as his study of “somatic markers” is valuable. In other cases, too, I seek something positive from the engagement. Above all, I am not so eager to convict every neuroscientist of inveterate reductionism that it becomes impossible to learn something positive. In that respect I admire the practice that Merleau-Ponty and Bergson adopted several decades ago. They paid close attention to the biology of the day, even as they drew upon the depth grammar of cultural experience to enrich it. Today, for example, research by Rizzolatti on mirror neurons may be promising. It is impressive that he started reading Merleau-Ponty shortly after his research on mirror neurons was launched, that he is interested in how cultural practice becomes encoded into the human sensorium even before a child acquires linguistic skill, that he thinks this register continues be important even as more complex intersubjective capacities develop, that he seeks to explore a variety of interfaces between cultural experience and neuroscientific experiment, and that he is careful to distinguish the points at which available evidence supports his view from speculative assertions in need of further evidence.⁸ New research may or may not support the importance with which he invests mirror neurons in the development of socially reactive emotions, language, and intentionality. And yet resistance to such work may express subliminal stakes, too, particularly by cognitive scientists who pursue an autonomous science free of interinvolvement with cultural theory and cultural theorists who seek autonomy on their side. The division between “the faculties” that Kant introduced into the academy several centuries ago continues to haunt it. These divisions need to be crossed in multiple ways today without being eliminated. That being said, Rizzolatti’s theory remains at a speculative stage, and it will almost certainly face significant revision in the future.

Queries and Probes
My first question to Leys is to ask her to assess the classic cultural theorists and philosophers to whom contemporary affect theory is most indebted. My second seeks more precise clarification of what it takes in her view to be an intentionalist and how compatible that reading of intentionality is with exploratory work to heighten, move, or stretch established

sensitivities. Here is a third. Does any contemporary neuroscientist make a positive contribution to her reading of culture? Or does she support a mode of cultural reduction that eschews work by biologists, neuroscientists, and the like on the human sensorium? Perhaps, given Leys’s own work in psychoanalysis, recent exchanges between psychoanalysts and neuroscientists will turn out to be interesting.

Oh, yes. What about the girl who laughed when the brain probe hit the right spot? My guess is that upon reviewing the study she enriched her interpretation of laughter. As time unfolded she appreciated even more how spontaneous laughter is both a joy in itself and one sign of the excess of affect over epistemically available belief and perception. I also imagine that her creative powers now flourish as she periodically lapses into states in which the portals of perception open a bit to prime an uncanny interplay between preconscious affect and emotion. I suppose I will have to wait for a later New York Times report on her life to ascertain the accuracy of those projections.