William Connolly is in error when he remarks that I begin my article with a discussion of scientific accounts that reduce the emotions to a few genetically wired categories and that I suggest that the cultural theorists who are interested in affect are driven in the same reductive direction (William E. Connolly, “The Complexity of Intention,” Critical Inquiry 37 [Summer 2011]: 792–99). Rather, I begin by considering certain theories of Brian Massumi and other cultural theorists including Connolly who, as I show, claim to be inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Baruch Spinoza, and other philosophers of nature and who accordingly attempt to distance themselves from a crude determinism and geneticism by recasting biology in dynamic, energistic, and nondeterministic terms that stress its unpredictable and potentially emancipatory qualities. That Connolly gets this wrong—he seems to think he is making an important point against me—is a telling sign.

As I make clear, the aim of my article is to suggest the existence of a deeper affinity that ties together reductive psychologists and neuroscientists such as Silvan Tomkins, Paul Ekman, and Antonio Damasio and more philosophically inclined “affect theorists” such as Connolly: their shared,
mistaken commitment to the idea of a presumed separation between the affect system on the one hand and signification or meaning or intention on the other. In the course of my paper I discuss three experiments that play strategic roles in cultural theorists’ arguments about affect. But nowhere in his response does Connolly show a willingness to defend or come to grips with any of the empirical details of the experiments I analyze. Instead, he takes the easier route of restating his views and retreating to the supposed high ground of Henri Bergson, Deleuze, William James, Friedrich Nietzsche, Alfred North Whitehead, and others. I am not quite sure what the force of Connolly’s appeal to the authority of such thinkers is supposed to be, but insofar as they may be taken as having held views identical to his own I would wish to say that they too were mistaken. Whether or not they actually did hold such views is, of course, another question.

On the basis of the authority of Whitehead and other canonical figures, Connolly repeats his claims regarding the significance of a half-second delay in “the organization of perception” (p. 792). He thus assures us that “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” (p. 793). But to say this obfuscates the issue involved in Libet’s experiments on the phenomenon of the so-called half-second delay. For, as I show in my paper, the question at stake in the debate over his experiments is whether intentional agency is carried out by the brain because the mind arrives a half second too late to play the role usually accorded to it. In other words, what is at issue is the materialist claim that our intentions have no influence on our actions because they arrive too late in the chain of events to do anything but monitor what the brain decides for us. As Massumi puts the position he believes is proven by Libet’s experiments: “during the mysterious half-second, what we think of as ‘free,’ ‘higher’ functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by autonomic, bodily reactions occurring in the brain outside consciousness, and between brain and finger but prior to

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There is now a rapidly growing literature on will skepticism. Does Connolly still endorse Libet’s experimental work in spite of my criticisms and indeed the criticisms of others? Presumably he does—but then what is his response to the criticisms in question?

In the next section of his response, Connolly writes that he “joins” Whitehead and Stuart Kauffman in “breaking the previous identity between consciousness and intention” (p. 794). Since he concedes that I myself don’t assume an identity between intention and consciousness (p. 795), it is unclear what point he thinks he is making. In my paper, I show that, in spite of their explicit hostility to dualism, many of the new affect theorists succumb to a false dichotomy between mind and body because they equate the mind with consciousness and therefore treat everything that can’t be attributed to mental processes, defined in this way, to the behavior of the body. In other words, Connolly seems to be saying that these affect theorists are in error when they adopt such a false dualism between mind (consciousness) and the body because they don’t make room for the existence of unconscious mental states. Is this a new view of the matter on his part?

In his discussion of intentionality, Connolly posits a continuum of intentionality and agency between humans and primitive organisms such as bacteria, even as he appears to allow for the difference it makes for humans to be able to “ponder” (p. 794)—that is, to have second-order thoughts about—the mental states they may share with nonhuman organisms. In extending “some degree of agency and intentionality well beyond the human estate” (p. 794), Connolly follows the emergentist ideas of Kauffman, who suggests that with life came agency and “with agency came values, meaning, and doing, all of which are as real in the universe as particles in motion.” According to Kauffman, the behavior of a bacterium when it responds to the presence of a local glucose gradient is a manifestation of the evolutionary onset of choice and “thus of meaning [and] value,” because in detecting glucose it is already responding to a meaningful sign which it interprets and about which it could be mistaken. It would take me too far afield to assess the plausibility of Kauffman’s claim that natural signs can function as intentional signs in this way, a huge topic that Con-

2. See Alfred R. Mele, Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will (Oxford, 2009). In this book, Mele traces recent skepticism about the role of intentions in human actions to Libet’s studies of the brain’s readiness potential, studies he then proceeds to dismantle.
4. Ibid., p. 86.
olly does not even begin to confront. But if he believes with Kauffman that intention extends to the very simplest forms of organic life, why does he enthusiastically accept as valid the experiments of Libet, who argued that the brain generates our voluntary movements and that intentions arrive too late in the process to do anything but supervise the results? Why does he endorse the position of Massumi and other affect theorists who hold that affect is an inhuman, nonsignifying force that operates below the threshold of intention, consciousness, and signification? For that matter, why does he find the work of Damasio so appealing when the latter explicitly defines the basic emotions as functioning independently of intention and meaning? From my perspective, intentionality involves concept-possession; the term intentionality carries with it the idea that thoughts and feelings are directed to conceptually and cognitively appraised and meaningful objects in the world. The general aim of my paper is to propose that affective neuroscientists and the new affect theorists are thus making a mistake when they suggest that emotion or affect can be defined in nonconceptual or nonintentional terms.5

It is not apparent where Connolly now stands on this issue. In the next section of his response, subtitled “Affect and Emotion,” he remarks that “emotion and affect are essentially interinvolved, and neither is entirely reducible to the other” (p. 795). Since he does not tell us what he thinks the distinction between affect and emotion consists in, the significance of his claim is impossible to assess. Connolly observes in this connection that “at the infrasensible level, below feeling and awareness, fast moving, coarse ideational intensities are not typically available to direct intellectual scrutiny or control” (p. 795). The implication of this characteristically vague statement is that affect, which according to Connolly operates at this infrasensible level, is nevertheless not dissociated from “ideation” (or signification), as the rest of the cultural theorists with whom he is aligned tend to claim. But, as this is precisely my position, it is unclear why Connolly thinks his remarks count as an argument against me. It is of course true, as he goes on to state, that “affective flows” can be observed by brain-imaging techniques and other detection devices, in the sense that changes in body-brain activation can be shown to occur when people are in emotional states (p. 795). It is also true, as Connolly notes as well, that such body-brain

5. As I point out in my paper, we don’t have to equate conceptual capacities with the ability to form propositions or linguistic utterances, as certain cognitive theorists do, because this wrongly limits the capacity for cognition and intentionality to human animals. At the same time, it seems to me correct to suggest that in the case of the human animal the acquisition of language means that there are no bounds to the conceptual anymore, as Robert Pippin following G. W. F. Hegel puts it.
activation doesn’t specify contents (p. 795). Since no sane person would disagree with such statements, I fail to see their polemical force. None of the things Connolly says about the importance of the “infrasensible register,” or about the mass media, or about the need for “egalitarians and pluralists” (p. 796) to intervene in media politics have any polemical force against my position either—unless he continues to believe that this infrasensible register lies beyond the influence of ideation or conceptuality, which is precisely the point at issue.

Throughout his response, Connolly appears to want to portray me as someone who, in a conservative and reactionary way, is trying to defend humanistic cultural theory from the encroachment of scientifically minded thinkers from the “outside,” whereas he is someone who is generously open to the findings of neuroscientists. But this portrait is false. I am far from saying that humanists have nothing to learn from scientists; my engagement with the work of Alan Fridlund, James A. Russell, Lisa Feldman Barrett, and many others speaks for itself on this point. The issue here is not in which discipline a particular idea originates but whether the idea is a good one—indeed, whether it is correct. It is precisely because I appreciate science that I draw the line at bad science—as well as at the predictable appeal to the latter by humanists who have adopted the theoretical assumptions I argue against in my essay. (“Does any contemporary neuroscientist make a positive contribution to [Leys’s] reading of culture?” Connolly asks (p. 799). Indeed, some do, by challenging the false reductionism of so many of their peers and by emphasizing instead the role of contextual meaning in emotional states.)

Put another way, I don’t accuse Connolly of not liking science just because he has recently found reasons for criticizing Joseph LeDoux, whose experiments on the role of the amygdala in the rat’s fear response he once praised but now finds too reductive. It would not surprise me if Connolly eventually were to reject the work of Antonio Damasio, an investigator whose work he has strongly supported in the past. In fact, in his response Connolly now criticizes Damasio for adopting “too functionalist a reading of evolution and too restricted a notion of emotion” (p. 798). By this I take it Connolly now recognizes that Damasio accepts a “restricted” notion according to which there is a limited number of evolved, built-in basic emotions that function independently of cognition or signification, a view that is the target of my paper. But if Connolly now repudiates this central aspect of Damasio’s position, I don’t see how he can simultaneously and without embarrassment continue to find “valuable” (p. 798) Damasio’s “somatic marker hypothesis,” a hypothesis that, as I observe in my paper, depends on precisely that same “restricted” notion. The same
contradiction comes up when in a note Connolly brings to my attention his article, “Experience and Experiment” (2006), in which he makes use of Damasio’s analysis of a patient with bilateral amygdala damage who, it was held, could not experience fear. But as I have already indicated in my paper in a brief reference to Connolly’s article and as I have discussed at length elsewhere, Damasio’s investigation of that patient likewise depends on the “restricted” assumptions about emotion that Connolly now says he condemns.6

Mirror neurons are a topic of great interest. But I anticipate that Connolly will soon temper his present enthusiasm for the speculations about the material basis of intentionality and emotion now being put forward by their discoverer Giacomo Rizzolatti and others. Such a pattern of enthusiasm followed by rejection suggests that Connolly has no deep stake in the scientific experiments he cites but just employs them as props to support certain ideological commitments and then abandons them when it appears that they won’t do the work he had hoped for. My larger point, however, is that he will always find a preliminary use for the research of the kind represented by LeDoux, Damasio, and Rizzolatti precisely because such scientists assume the same separation between affect and cognition that Connolly in fact endorses.

My last comment concerns the case of the epileptic girl who was made to laugh when implanted electrodes stimulated parts of her brain. As I point out in my paper, Connolly likes this experiment because the girl was obliged to offer various reasons for her laughter after the fact; as in the case of Libet’s experimental subjects, the behavior appeared to come first and only afterward could the girl come up with reasons, or rationalizations, for it. The experiment therefore appeared to suggest that the brain causes our emotional reactions without regard to the meaning those emotional reactions might have for us. Connolly concludes his response by guessing that, on reviewing the study of her case, the patient 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” (p. 799).

But what is “joy in itself” when Connolly has stripped it of all conceptual meaning and indeed from intentional life? When the “meaning” we

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ascribe to “laughter,” here defined in terms of the movements of the person’s body, is cut off from the reasons we might have for it, when laughter is seen as a purely neurological event, then we have totally lost our grip on the meaning of the word “joy.” The girl’s brain might be stimulated, for example, when she was given what counted for her as bad news and she would then be making all the physical motions that could be described as laughter while feeling sad that her dog had died. So either joy has its usual meaning of happiness and the girl’s stimulated laughter has nothing to do with it, or joy has no meaning beyond the designation of the physical movements associated with laughing. Connolly’s inability to choose between these options or to recognize that there’s a choice to be made is symptomatic of the reductionism intrinsic to his project and on display whenever he goes beyond his usual homilies on the emancipatory value of appreciating affect.