Is there a secular body? Or, in somewhat different terms, is there a particular configuration of the human sensorium—of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions—specific to secular subjects, and thus constitutive of what we mean by “secular society”? What intrigues me about this question is that, despite its apparent simplicity, the path toward an answer seems not at all clear. For example, are the scholarly sensibilities and the modes of affective attunement that find expression here in this essay elements of a secular habitus? What would be indicated by calling such expressive habits “secular”? Clearly, they have been learned in a secular institution (i.e., a secular university). Would we say, therefore, that my writing displays the embodied aptitudes and habits of a secular person, and that a study of the educational techniques employed at the university would tell us how secular subjects are formed? If that were the case, then why, despite the plethora of studies on the education system in the United States, do we not feel quite comfortable when asked to describe the embodied aptitudes of a secular subject? I should clarify before I go further that the notion of “secular” I employ here does not stand in opposition to “religious”; rather, informed by the path-breaking inquiries of the two scholars whose work I want to engage here, the anthropologist Talal Asad and the political theorist William Connolly, I understand the secular as a concept that articulates a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations that constitute an important dimension of what we call modernity and its defining forms of knowledge and practice—both religious and nonreligious.¹ The secular is, in Asad’s words, “conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism”
(2003:16), and therefore part of the background presupposed by our routine ways of distinguishing secular from religious in law, politics, ethics, and aesthetics.

But let me return to the reflection I had going. I had suggested a little unease with the idea of sending a student off to the university classroom as a site in which to study the formation of the embodied capacities of secular subjects. What about the psychoanalyst’s couch? Or the gym at the YMCA? Or a training seminar for advertising executives? Clearly some of the habits and attitudes honed within such sites of modern self-fashioning must qualify as “secular.” But again the question is begged: what are we implying—conceptually, historically, institutionally—when we designate such affects and attitudes (I am using a copious vocabulary of embodiment) as secular, as opposed to, say, “modern, or “liberal,” perhaps? I don’t think an answer to this question is readily forthcoming, and the problem is not simply one of an adequate definition.

One reason for our hesitation and uncertainty around this question undoubtedly owes to the difficulty of establishing an analytical distance from what is clearly a foundational dimension of modern life. The secular is the water we swim in. It is for this reason that Talal Asad (2003), in the Introduction to his *Formations of the Secular* ([2003] hereafter, *Formations*), cautions us against approaching it directly, suggesting instead that “it is best pursued through its shadows” (2003:16). In this regard, my starting question—What is a secular body?—is blindingly direct, and therefore a rather blunt analytical instrument. That said, I still think it may have its use, less in terms of the answers we are able to give to it than by the kinds of resistance we encounter when we try. That is, to follow where this question runs aground, where it is deflected, postponed, perhaps where it becomes obtuse, uninteresting, may help us to elucidate some of the contours of the concept we are concerned with. Is it the wrong question to ask? Does it force us to rethink our models of embodiment, habitus, sensibility? An answer to these questions could be very useful for getting a better grasp of the secular.

I have chosen to focus on the works of Talal Asad (2003) and Bill Connolly (1999) because of the impact these works have had on how we have come to pose questions about the secular and secularism. Moreover, within the respective analytical frameworks they have developed, they have strongly foregrounded issues of embodiment—Asad privileging notions of sensibility and attitude, Connolly building a rich and heterogeneous philosophical vocabulary of the passions from such sources as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, among others. In what follows, I want to explore the question I raised above by means of the analyses put forward by these scholars concerning the embodied character of the secular. In this regard,
my goal here is very modest. I ask: What kind of answers do we find in the work of these two scholars to the question, “What is a secular body”? And what might these answers—or refusals to answer—tell us about the practical and conceptual contours of secular and secularism?

Let me start by noting that, while the secular body may remain something of an enigma, we do know quite a lot about the techniques different religious traditions have developed to hone a pious sensorium, that is, the embodied aptitudes and affects necessary for the achievement of a virtuous life as defined by those traditions. One of the richest and most influential examples of such scholarship is Asad’s own pioneering work on techniques of the body practiced by medieval Christian monks. Extending insights from Marcel Mauss’s (1979) writings on body techniques and Foucault’s inquiries into Greek and Christian arts of self-cultivation (1988, 1990), Asad (1993) examined a variety of disciplinary exercises and techniques of self-cultivation (in short, ritual practices) by which medieval Christians sought to reshape their wills, desires, and emotions in accord with authoritative standards of virtue. I mention this work here because it provides an extremely useful model for thinking about the interrelation of knowledge, practice, and embodiment within a tradition, directing us to forms of collective and individual discipline and to the concepts of self and body that inform them.² It is interesting therefore to note at the outset that, despite an emphasis on embodied modes of appraisal in both Asad’s Formations and Connolly’s Why I Am Not a Secularist ([1999] hereafter, Not a Secularist), descriptions of self-cultivation or practices of self-discipline are largely (although not entirely, as I note below) absent from both texts. That is, we find very little in these works in regard, not only to how the sensibilities and visceral modes of judgment of secular subjects are cultivated but also how they give shape to and find expression in a secular life? Admittedly, a cautious approach to this issue is entirely warranted in light of how new and unfamiliar the secular is as a research problem. Nonetheless, I want to look at certain points in these texts where this question is most directly addressed. One word of warning: The few comments I will make on Asad’s and Connolly’s writings barely scratch the surface of these immensely rich books.

Not a Secularist combines an analysis of secular discourses on ethics, politics, and language with an attempt to show how an engagement with traditions that incorporate an appreciation for affective and visceral registers of existence can be used to generate resources for a productive and necessary revision of secular thinking. Not surprisingly, most of Connolly’s exploration of the embodied character of political judgment is focused on thinkers who stand at some remove from the
dominant currents of secular thought, while his treatment of secular arguments tends overall to emphasize the dangers and limitations of their failing to thematize the visceral register. There are, however, certain points in his discussion where the question of a secular bodily ethics comes up. Informed in part by Asad’s (1993) account of monastic disciplinary techniques, Connolly writes:

It may be important to understand how representational discourse itself, including the public expression and defense of fundamental beliefs, affects and is affected by the visceral register of intersubjectivity. Public discourses do operate within dense linguistic fields that specify how beliefs are to be articulated and tested and how ethical claims are to be redeemed. But repetitions and defenses of these articulations also write scripts upon prerepresentational sites of appraisal. [1999:26]

The practice of articulating and defending secular political claims, he suggests here, serves to mold and deepen the affective attachments that passionately bind one to the secular form of life those claims uphold. This is one of the few locations where Connolly connects his conceptual analysis of the secular with a kind of institutional practice, albeit a highly discourse-centered one. The question to ask, it seems to me, is: Why, in a book so centered around the task of rethinking secular politics, is there so little attention to the affective attachments that secure the authority of secular political judgments? I will come back to this later.

Perhaps the most visceral element of the secular discourses identified by Connolly is their rejection of the visceral dimension itself. Kantian and neo-Kantian political philosophies devalue forms of life that give priority to their own sensory dimensions, a standpoint that secures the possibility of regulating the place of religion in public life insomuch as religion is understood to privilege this passional, sensual register (1999:32). Indeed, for Connolly the value of religious traditions for political thought today lies precisely in the resources such traditions offer for thinking about the contribution of affective experience to shaping our practices of political judgment and reason. Secularism suffers, in his view, from its failure to thematize the place of what he calls the “infrasensible register”—affects and dispositions operating below the threshold of consciousness—within its own style of reasoning.

Kant’s marginalization of Christian theology in favor of a “rational religion” grounded in moral reasoning is a key moment, in Connolly’s account, in the philosophical development of this moral repulsion for the visceral. As he notes, Kant.
degrades ritual and arts of the self without eliminating them altogether, for these arts work on the “sensibility” rather than drawing moral obligation from the supersensible realm as practical reason does. The point is to deploy them just enough to render crude sensibilities better equipped to accept the moral law drawn from practical reason. Secularists later carry this Kantian project of diminishment a step or two further. [Connolly 1999:31]

I want to pause on this point to ask where it might lead us in thinking about a secular sensorium, or about the sensibilities that give shape to a secular life. Kant’s treatment of the question of sensibility is guided and limited by his primary aim of securing the purity of the moral will, its protection from what are seen to be the contaminating effects of sensible desire. This is achieved through his positing of a two-world metaphysic that ensures the autonomy of the moral will by assigning it to the domain of the supersensible while circumscribing the role of the passions and habits to the sphere of sensible life. Honed sensibilities and practices of self-cultivation do have a positive function in disciplining the cruder drives within the self, but they never directly contribute to moral reasoning. As Kant (1991) notes, in a comment cited by Connolly: “Ethical gymnastics, therefore, consists only in combating natural impulses sufficiently to be able to master them when a situation comes up in which they threaten morality; hence it makes one valiant and cheerful in the consciousness of one’s restored freedom” (Connolly 1999:174).

One place where we do find in Kant a discussion of sensibilities, and hence a text that might point us toward a conception of a secular sensorium, is in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1978). Although the question of sensibilities is discussed in many parts of that text, here I will simply mention one particular, and highly ritualistic, moment, the dinner party scene, in which Kant lays out a set of guidelines for the dinner host to follow to engender the sort of civilized sociability that befits Kantian rational beings: topics that may engender more violent passions among the guests must be avoided at all costs (as must music!); the thread of a conversation must not be interrupted until it has reached its natural conclusion; “deadly silence” must be strictly avoided. Overall, the goal is to maintain a conversational tone that befits a “well-bred, partly sensuous and partly ethicointellectual, human being” (Kant 1978:185), so as to harmonize the inclination to good living with the inclination to virtue and the moral law such that the former does not hinder the latter.

Following Connolly, I would read Kant’s dinner party rules as a pedagogical device geared to disciplining the emotions and attitudes of a secular subject. Why
secular (again, as opposed to, say, modern)? If I understand Connolly correctly, it is because the style of restrained emotional expression that Kant encourages provides a normative image of public reason against which the more passional forms of sociability and knowledge associated with religious sects are found to be inadequate, and thus subject to regulation in accord with the doctrine of political secularism. We might say, the secular subject—the Kantian dinner host—is one whose speech and comportment incorporates a recognition of the distinctions authorized by the twin categories of religious and secular. Put differently, a secular person is someone whose affective-gestural repertoires express a negative relation to forms of embodiment historically associated with (but not limited to) theistic religion.

I am trying here to delineate a path that Connolly’s work opens up for asking about what I first called the secular body. Although the path seemed clear at the outset, it now appears far less so, for the following reason. From the 16th to the 18th century, a variety of social transformations took place that are key to our understanding of the emergence of the modern subject, among them, the desensualization of knowledge as described by Walter Ong (2005), the stilling of passionate expression within courtly society that Norbert Elias has examined (2000), and, more generally, the increasing internalization of psychic and emotional life within bourgeois society, the transfer of vast realms of experience from the surface of public life into the invisible depths of the lonely individual. These conceptual and social transformations, to which Kant contributed, were not the result of a single overarching process, but were propelled by different, if sometimes interlinking, historical trajectories, circumstances, and problems. In light of this, and recognizing the indebtedness of Kant’s own viewpoints on reason and the senses to these prior developments, should we say that these transformations are part of the genealogy of the secular? To say so, it seems, would entail losing a great deal of the specificity and historical locatedness of that term. So, what aspects of the modern soul are properly secular, and to which history of the body should they be ascribed?

Let me see if I can develop this line of inquiry further by drawing on some of the arguments put forward by Talal Asad in Formations. Let me start by saying a little about what I take Asad to mean be the “the secular.” In his chapter on an “Anthropology of Secularism,” which I will focus on here, he states: “I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (Asad 2003:25). To explore these dimensions of the secular, he examines shifts in the grammar of a number of concepts—myth,
the sacred, pain, the human—concepts that articulate practices we have come to identify as secular. The practices that he takes as secular, in other words, are so, not simply because they are nonreligious, but because they have been discursively identified and valorized through the discourse of secularism (as distinct from the political doctrine). For Asad, a practice is not secular because it stands in a particular relation to the political doctrine of secularism. Rather, the historical discourse of the secular, as predicated on the opposition religious–secular, is integral to the grammar of the concepts he examines.

Let me draw on two examples from this first chapter to pursue the question of secular embodiment. In one section, Asad explores how shifts in the grammar of the concept of myth contributed to the development of the secular tradition of Romantic poetry. For poets such as Blake and Coleridge, the “mythic method,” as Asad refers to it, provided a secular means by which spiritual truths could be accessed and given expression (2003:52–53). Instead of the virtue of faith, such poetic geniuses needed only to tune into their deep inner feelings and express these sincerely. Elaborating on these Romantic notions, Asad notes,

This may help to explain the prevalence among Victorian unbelievers of what Stefan Collini calls “a rhetoric of sincerity.” For not only was the idea of being true to oneself conceived of as a moral duty, it also presupposed the existence of a secular self whose sovereignty had to be demonstrated through acts of sincerity. The self’s secularity consisted in the fact that it was the precondition of transcendent (poetic or religious) experience and not its product. [2003:52]

I call attention to this section because it provides an example of what might be called a practice of secular self-fashioning: the honing of a rhetoric of sincerity as necessary to the cultivation of the secular subject. Moreover, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between the romantic emphasis on sincerity and the Protestant concern for the sincerity of speech within ritual professions of faith. But why does Asad not develop this line of inquiry, especially in light of how important such question were within his work on medieval monasticism? Why, I ask, are there so few descriptions of practices in a book explicitly focused on the sensory and embodied dimensions of the secular?

A number of the chapters in Formations explore different aspects of the changing grammar of pain. One element of this change concerns a turning away from a Christian discourse on sin and punishment in ministering to pain and the development, in contrast, of a scientific vocabulary and experimental methods for addressing pain. “In this example,” Asad writes, referring to Rosalind Rey’s
discussion of pain during the Enlightenment, “the secularization of pain signals not merely the abandonment of a transcendental language (“religious obsessions”) but the shift to a new preoccupation—from the personal attempt at consoling and curing (that is, inhabiting a social relationship) to a distanced attempt at investigating the functions and sensations of the living body” (2003:48). As Asad emphasizes, the new practices surrounding pain and suffering are not adequately grasped in terms of the notion of “disenchantment”—as a secularist narrative asserts—“when what is at stake are different patterns of sensibility about pain, and different ways of objectifying it” (2003:48). Asad pursues this inquiry into the secularization of pain and the shifting attitudes, sensibilities, and knowledges that have propelled it from a variety of different angles, as it bears, for example, on the practice of human rights, on the conduct of war, on childbirth, on sadomasochism. Given my limited space here, let me stay with his discussion of the emergence of an experimental science of pain. We recognize in Asad’s account of the secularization of pain, with its new sensibilities, styles of objectification, mechanistic concepts of the body and its processes, the basis for contemporary biomedical practice. As we know, biomedical models and forms of reasoning play an immense and growing role in modern society, in terms of both the institutions that regulate the many facets of our lives that fall under the rubric of “health” as well as concepts and practices through which we understand and respond to many dimensions of our experience. In this light, would it be correct to state that the regime of knowledge and power that we call “biomedical” plays a significant role in constituting the secular, and that the disciplinary exercises and institutions put into play by this regime shape us—our attitudes, our visceral reasoning, our patterned hierarchies of the senses—as secular people? In putting forward this suggestion, I am undoubtedly pushing Asad’s cautious and careful inquiry well beyond the kinds of claim he would embrace—but I am interested in trying to ascertain why such an expansion of what we refer to as “secular” strikes us as unjustified or wrong (if indeed it does).

One reason for resisting the equation of biomedicine with the secular would be that we lose a grasp of what is unique to secularity, that the genealogy of the secular becomes fused with and indistinguishable from the genealogy of the modern. We lose an understanding of the way the practice of distinguishing religious from secular gives impetus to the set of shifts that constitute the secular—and hence we lose a sense of precisely what is secular about our contemporary biomedical practices. In other words, the secular dimension of them, the way that they embed a form of reasoning that has its historical basis in the production and mobilization of the religious–secular opposition escapes us. From this perspective, we are right
to call our regime of health “secular” but we are not in a position to understand what this entails, lacking as we do, an adequate analysis of how we got here.

In this light, my original question—Is there a secular body?—appears not wrong but premature. We could now understand what I have traced as a certain hesitation and reluctance to give flesh to a secular subject within Asad’s and Connolly’s writing as being founded in a recognition of the danger entailed in posing this question too quickly.

My sense in reading these two subtle inquiries into the secular, however, is that the authors’ reticence to speak about the embodied capacities and dispositions of a secular subject is not just the result of scholarly prudence, but that it reflects, rather, something about the concept of the secular. What we have seen is that, each time we attempt to characterize a secular subject in terms of a determinant set of embodied dispositions, we lose a sense of what secular refers to. Note as well that, while the statement, “He lives a very religious life” gives us some sense of the shape of a life, “He lives a very secular life” tells us almost nothing (except, negatively, that the person does not engage in practices of worship). In contrast, when we speak about secular history, or secular time, or secular literature, or even a secular discourse on pain, we seem to know our way about—in a Wittgensteinian sense of having a feel for the use of our term within certain language games.

To this point, I have attempted to trace out some of the various ways that our attempts to speak about, or theorize, a secular body encounter resistance. What might this resistance tell us about our category of the secular? In the space that remains, I want to explore one possible direction toward an answer to this question.

In both Asad’s and Connolly’s writings, the secular identity of a practice is not simply because of its philosophical foundations—its grounding in a rationalist, empiricist, or materialist perspective, for example. Rather, the practices they explore under the rubric of the secular are those that have emerged through a process of differentiation structured by the binaries of religion–secular, belief–knowledge, sacred–profane, and so on. This is not simply to say that the categories of religious and secular are historically entwined, or that they are reciprocally defining (e.g., like man and woman), but that the secular marks a relational dynamic more than an identity. We might restate this argument to say that, at least in many cases, a practice or a sensibility that we designate “secular” is one that depends on, one that cannot be abstracted from, the secularist narrative of the progressive replacement of religious error by secular reason—what Asad calls the “triumphalist narrative of secularism.” Or, again, in a slightly different formulation,
a secular sensibility is one considered from the standpoint of its contribution to
that progressivist narrative.

Let me try to clarify this point through an example. Take the tradition of
Romantic poetry discussed by Asad. Asad’s account of the emergence of this
tradition focuses on a number of early-19th-century developments in aesthetic,
religious, and scientific practice, including the development of a secular discourse
on the meaning of inspiration, and new uses of the idea of myth within both historical
and fictional genres of writing. Why is the history of Romantic poetry a starting
point for Asad in his attempt to develop an anthropology of the secular? On one
hand, this tradition allows Asad to challenge accounts of a necessary or natural
superseding of the religious by the secular, by exploring some of the historical
contingencies that together enabled a new, so-called secular practice to emerge.
More importantly, it is a tradition that owes its aesthetic values to a particular
authorizing narrative, one highlighting the movement from religious to secular
(from the prophet to the poet; from divine inspiration to creative genius). The
sensibilities that the romantic poet’s work gave expression to, and that shaped his
audience’s cultivated response, I want to suggest, depended on the rhetoric of
secularization (the forward movement from error to truth) as a condition of their
exercise. (It is worth noting here that many modern practices, be they aesthetic or
social or political, are not subject to the play of the secular–religious opposition,
and are not validated by reference to this binarism.)

How does the account of the secular I am suggesting here bear on the problem
of the secular sensorium, or what I called the secular body? Let me try to answer
this by reference to one particular tradition for thinking embodiment, that afforded
by the Aristotelian notions of habitus and virtue. In my earlier book, The Ethical
Soundscape (2006), I explored how this tradition had contributed to shaping an
Islamic practice of listening to sermons in contemporary Egypt, both in the ritual
context of Friday worship and outside the mosque through the audition of cassette
recorded sermons. As I described in that book, many people listen to sermons
as a means of ethical self-improvement, a way to reinforce and deepen not only
their knowledge of Islamic doctrines but also the ethical emotions and attitudes they
understand as enabling correct styles of speech, comportment, and moral judgment.
Coupled with the proliferation of new listening practices among ordinary Egyptians,
sermon tapes provided one of the means by which Islamic ethical traditions were
accommodated to a new political and technological order, to its rhythms, labor
routines, forms of distraction, but also to its political incitements, its call to citizenly
participation. The discursive arena wherein cassette sermons circulate in Egypt,
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I argued, is geared to the extension and circulation of the disciplining power of ethical speech, a goal that takes public deliberation as one of its modalities. Acts of public speech within this arena are not aimed at producing political consensus but in enabling the interlocutors to cultivate pious dispositions, the embodied sensibilities and modes of expression understood by participants within this domain to facilitate the development and practice of Islamic virtues. The cassette listeners I worked with sought to forge a habitus—in their terms, such virtues as modesty, humility, and fear of God—that would allow them to achieve excellence in the practices that they saw as essential to Islamic traditions of ethical reasoning, and thus to the revitalization and maintenance of an Islamic society.6

Romantic poets, of course, also sought to hone skills that would allow them to achieve excellence in the aesthetic practices they undertook. What distinguishes these two contexts? Sermon listening takes place in and contributes to a tradition of moral reasoning, with its internal notions of the good and a changing repertoire of practices by which the good is to be achieved. The honed sensibilities of the Romantic poet, however, contribute to the project of the secular only insomuch as they are grasped as part of the movement of negation and overcoming by which the secular emerges from the religious. We might say that the poetic sensibilities themselves are not secular (nor religious, for that matter), but that they have been encompassed by and appropriated within the narrative of the secular emancipation from religion. They are sensibilities that fit into the game of secularism.

The analysis of the secular I am developing here directs us less toward a determinant set of embodied dispositions than to a distinct mode of power, one that mobilizes the productive tension between religious and secular to generate new practices through a process of internal self-differentiation. The boundaries of our categories religious and secular do not preexist this process but are continuously determined and reciprocally redefined within it. Moreover, insomuch as the identity of a secular practice owes to a particular dynamic relation established between these two categories—that every secular practice is accompanied by a religious shadow, as it were—then the secular will always be subject to a certain indeterminacy or instability. This instability, ensured by the in principle impossibility of bordering off the secular from the religious, is not a limit on secular power but a condition of its exercise. In his groundbreaking study of secularity and law in contemporary Egypt, Hussein Agrama has explored how secular power depends on such a generative instability (Agrama in press). Pointing to some of the difficulties that arise when one tries to define the Egyptian state as either secular or religious, he notes:
“For the peculiar intractability of secularism lies not only in the normativity of its
categories, but significantly, in the indeterminacies it provokes. Indeterminacies
that powerfully contribute to the continually felt gap between the ideals secularism
promotes and the realities that it establishes” (Agrama in press). Following Agrama’s
suggestion here, we might say that one aspect of the secular lies in an attitude of
continual skepticism toward secularism’s own claim to the teleological overcoming
of the religious.

The secularist movement as it developed in the mid–19th century encom-
passed both positive and negative impulses.7 Its founders, most importantly Robert
Owen and G. J. Holyoake, sought, on the positive side, to uncover a new system
of moral truth, founded on rationalist, utilitarian, and materialist principles. As
Holyoake wrote in 1953: “Secularism is the province of the real, the known, the
useful, and the affirmative. It is the practical side of skepticism” (Royal 1974:150).
Its negative side lay in its relentless attack on what early secularists called the “spec-
culative error” of religion. The career of our concept of the secular has been shaped
by this double vocation, one in which the positive attempt to ground an ethical and
epistemological foundation remains dependent on a negative gesture whereby the
forms of knowledge and practice posited as religious are continuously overcome.
Although these twin movements have played an immense role in shaping what
we recognize and valorize as the secular-modern, they also account for a kind of
instability at the heart of the secular, one evident in the difficulties we encounter
when asking about the secular body.

Let me conclude these rather tentative and exploratory reflections by sug-
gestng why such an inquiry is important, particularly for scholars of Islam. It
has become increasingly apparent in recent years that any study of contemporary
religious traditions necessitates some engagement with religion’s dialectical part-
tner, the secular, understood as a key dimension of the moral, social, and political
transformations that have shaped global modernity. Yet, while we have good un-
derstanding of how the doctrine of political secularism—the state-imposed legal
separation of religion and politics—has impacted the conceptual and practical de-
velopment of religious life in many contexts, including Islamic ones, such as in
Turkey, Egypt, or Indonesia, we have little sense of the social ontology of the
secular, and the kinds of practices, sensibilities, and knowledges that it opens up.
Moreover, and as I hope I have made clear, to assimilate the secular to the modern,
as has often been the scholarly approach, tells us very little about a key constitutive
dimension of modernity.
ABSTRACT
In this essay, I want to follow out one line of inquiry into secularism and the secular opened up—if in different ways—by the pioneering works of William Connolly and Talal Asad: namely, the extent to which the development of secularism has historically entailed—among its various dimensions—a unique configuration of the human sensorium. For both of these scholars secularism must be approached, not simply through the doctrine of separation of church and state, not through the sociology of social differentiation and religion decline, but, rather, in terms of the cultivation of the distinct sensibilities, affects, and embodied dispositions that undergird secular forms of appraisal and practice. In my discussion, I ask, what answers do we find in the work of these two scholars to the question, What is a secular body?, and what might these answers—or refusals to answer—tell us about the practical and conceptual contours of the secular and secularism? [secularism, body, sensorium, affect]

NOTES
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1. The two primary texts I refer to in this essay are Asad’s Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (2003), and Connolly’s Why I Am Not a Secularist (1999).
2. The significance of embodied practice within religious traditions has been explored by anthropologists from a wide variety of theoretical standpoints. Among those scholars most indebted to Asad’s framing of this question, see Agrama 2010, Hirschkind 2006, and Mahmood 2005. Other recent and influential contributions to the anthropological exploration of sensory dimensions of religious practice include Csordas 1997, Desjarlais 2003, Meyer 2010, Stoller 1997, and Seremetakis 1994.
3. See, in particular, Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1999).
4. One useful discussion of this process is found in Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1982).
5. Webb Keane has explored with insight and originality the problematics of sincerity within Protestant devotional practices. See Keane 1997, 2007.
6. For a discussion of the development of a political blogosphere in Egypt over the last decade and its relation to, and impact on, the Islamic counterpublic described here, see Hirschkind 2010.

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