Other Grounds: Breaking Free of the Correlationist Circle

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Personal Effects

After I established these things, I thought I was entering port; but when I began to meditate about the union of soul and body, I felt as if I were thrown again into the open sea. For I could not find any way of explaining how the body makes anything happen in the soul, or vice versa, or how one substance can communicate with another created substance. Descartes had given up the game at this point, as far as we can determine from his writings.

— Leibniz

In the previous chapter, we saw how predicated thoughts could, by an indirect method, force motions that exceed predication. But what about direct commands? How do explicit thoughts result in recognizable actions? If I think, “Pick up the cup,” how does this arrangement of words translate into the motions in my arm, my hand, my feet, such that the action conforms, even approximately, to the thought? Leibniz couches the question in terms of the soul, but the mystery remains even when Cartesian dualism is discounted: How does a thought translate into a motion?

At this point, we’re at least able to understand why there is a question. For a local manifestation with only one virtual being (assuming such a manifestation exists), the translation of thought into motion would have no remainder, and the problem would never even come up for contemplation. A being with

a one-to-one match between mind and body would live like a born Zen master, without so much as a path between here and satori. The question itself—“how does thought translate into motion?”—is only there to be asked because the implicit mind is not alone in the body.

This explanation does not get us very far, though. For one thing, it still says nothing about how any kind of thinking ends up as doing, and yet, for all that, one has to admit that the doing gets done. If I’m unable to understand the mechanism of activity from within my own perspective, I simply fob off the work of that mechanism onto my other thinker, even though I was the one to think, “Pick up the cup.” And I’ve strongly implied that my other thinker doesn’t know the meaning of words, which makes fulfillment of the command puzzling, to the say the least.

We began to get some purchase on the problem when we identified speech as a threat to the implicit mind. An action that carries a meaning for me—the production of syllables in syntactic combination—prompts a response that has no relation to the semantic content of those syllables. My implicit mind doesn’t respond to truth statements with a keen grasp of their subtleties. It’s startled by clear propositions the same as it is by foolish lies. So language does cause some kind of physical response, even if it’s not the response actually being requested. Given the ubiquity of speech, we can also surmise that this threat must be more than momentary, and the startle response more or less a constant of the human condition. If this is so, as the studies of Frank Pierce Jones and others indicate, then we get a perplexing result: The dangerousness of speech cannot be specifically named, because the danger is conveyed by speech per se, and, moreover, the broadcast of any other danger (say, the imminent approach of a flood) will be compromised by a fear of the message. As a result, a basic purpose of signals—to report a threat as the motivation for an action—is rendered unreliable.

This unreliability is a stumbling block for many explanations of how language emerged, and the challenge certainly applies to my case as well. The cost of living in fear—worse, being unable to identify the reason for it—appears to be inordinately high.
Alexander gets around this objection by making the negative consequences of civilization, including language, so gradual that they go unnoticed until it’s too late. On my view, however, there is a stronger explanation — stronger because it works whether the development of language is fast or slow, yet preserves both the high price of unreliable signals and their flowering nonetheless.

As we have seen, speech can't be easily reduced to the efficient workings of instinct — or, to maintain the terminology I've borrowed from Bryant, the negentropy of the implicit mind. When I talk, I'm engaged in an activity that my implicit mind perceives as a foreign intrusion. But as it does so, it also goes into a startle, which in turn changes the mechanics of speaking. There may be two minds, but there's still only one body. So if the question “how does thought cause motion?” itself implies thoughts that are not strictly in accord with the negentropy of the implicit mind, we might suppose that these “extra” thoughts also cause motions in excess of the motions that would occur if only the implicit mind were present.

Let’s suppose, a little brazenly, that this is true: The overcrowded human simply displaces or donates its overcrowdedness to its local manifestation. (One can see the stirrings of this hypothesis in Leibniz, who, in his New System of Nature, redirects Descartes’ question “what conserves me?” from bodily organs to bodily motion.) Such a proposition might seem unwarranted from the start because, although the declarative and implicit minds are clearly not manifestations, I nonetheless have granted them quantity insofar as I’ve admitted that there are two of them. It may seem, then, that I’ve granted mathematical operators the status of objects that occupy space. This isn’t necessarily the case, however.

A case in point is the estuary we considered earlier. As a body of water that’s part ocean and part river, an estuary is subject to both tides and currents, and is characterized by brackish water and a distinct ecozone. Most people would happily grant that water takes up space, but tides and currents are a different matter. Each of these forces is distinct, yet they mingle in the same material. There is no place in the estuary where either
force is absent. On the contrary, their mutual presence defines the boundaries of the estuary. While a human being is clearly not an estuary, the reasoning is much the same: It’s not at all clear that mathematical operators have any dimensionality of their own, and the burden of proof lies with those who would argue that they do. Hence the argument for colocation, at least as presented so far, does not require us to accord spatial dimension to thought.

But we can’t leave space out of our equation entirely. Even if the initial thought of a sentence retains its weird nowhereness, we would be remiss to think that the resulting motions of speech obey anything but ordinary physical laws. And motions, as we know, are translated from one object to another. What this will mean for a coinhabited body is the appearance of extraneous motion — first in the body itself, and then in its contiguous environment. As with the combined forces of tide and current, which act on the banks to create unique effects, speech will extend beyond the limits of the body as an air flow that’s the product of two sources of propagation, and therefore somehow already a different kind of signal than a straightforward animal call.

Nor is there any reason to suppose that this effect should be limited to speech. The irrepressible fidgeting of children — let it be their polymorphous perversity — is well known to the long-suffering parent. Excess motion can come out of one part of the body or another, or from many parts at once, for no reason except that it has to come out. Needless to say, these motions will also extend to objects in the environment and alter them, just as speech does — indeed, all the more vividly when a denser object receives the impact. The difference between a wave traveling through the air and a scratch etched in granite is one of degree only. So it seems reasonable to suppose that coincidence in humans entails marking the world, literally, in a way that’s

not reducible to a single agent. Let’s call this progression, with more attention to geometry than to lumens, *radiance*, and its point of inertia, where friction brings a halt to the impulse, a *personal effect*.

Now everything is turned around. We’ve been assuming that the pursuit of a goal relies on the formulation of that goal in advance. Radiance, however, implies that personal effects are *existential* in the narrow sense of the term: They exist before they have essence. A motion born of multiple causes will, by its very multiplicity, lack any grounds for its execution, and so too its target: The end will appear without aforethought. On the colocationist view, the high price of cultural artifacts is paid whether we like it or not, and intelligence itself is put on the defensive, because personal effects develop haphazardly, out of the *accidents* of an unmastered body.

Lucretius famously attributed novelty in the universe to the *clinamen*, or swerve, which affected atoms unpredictably in their downward fall through the void. Here I’m proposing a specific variant of the swerve as a consequence of colocation, making no claims about the existence of the same principle elsewhere in the universe, while nevertheless maintaining that its novel effects arise without any fixed rule other than the rules of physics (which, according to Lucretius, may change as well). Artifacts appear prior to any immediately obvious functions. We’re artists and inventors first, reckoners later.

Of course, this swerve will be devilishly hard to witness, because we’re in it. Some readers will have had the experience of holding a spinning bicycle wheel and feeling an unexpected spiraling pull to the side. After several goes at it, the gyroscopic effect loses the element of surprise and one adjusts. Now, if a similar force were at work in our bodies at all times, we would compensate from the first throes of consciousness and never necessarily know that we were doing so. Moreover, because in our case both forces are withdrawn from the same body, as op-

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posed to one of them being withdrawn from the wheel, their multiple volitions would radiate as one effect—*a vector*—as they’re forced through the bottleneck of a single manifestation.

What begins to emerge, then, is an explanation for extension that manages to retain a Cartesian flavor. Overcrowding causes a co-dependent motion, which creates radiant effects on objects outside the body, but only when the declarative mind is active. Every *conscious* perception thus meets up with its already-embarked effect on the world. Because these imprints of thought saturate experience, it never appears as if anything is amiss. It seems that this is how the world looks.

That looks like a neatly locked up argument. But there’s also a strange assumption in it. I’ve said that my declarative and implicit minds can contribute to a novel effect by virtue of exerting themselves simultaneously, and also that my participation in the creation of that effect eludes my explicit awareness of it. In other words, a conscious thought causes an effect of which it remains unaware—even as it is causing it. How can this be?

The answer, I believe, can be found if we hark back to the explicit model. The declarative mind cannot resolve the gaps in its self-evident existence. I think, therefore I am, and when I do not think, I apparently am not. Because it is the case that I think intermittently, I’m unable to traverse an action without inventing a bridge operator, some other declarative mind to which I attach my identity. That’s what I’ve claimed so far. Now it appears that when I do think, the very existence of my conscious thought changes my environment, even in broad daylight. The suggestion, then, is that the change occurs in the gap. I do before I perceive what I do, just because the implicit mind and I both exist. Yet I never encounter the *perspective* of the implicit mind. I encounter a fabricated being to which I have inevitably assigned attributes of a perspective that is not mine but is inevitably *like* mine, since I participate in its construction.

How this plays out becomes a little clearer if we consider awareness in terms of space as well as time. If, for example, I hold my attention on some *remote* object—say, a star—my gaze will obviously do nothing to alter the star, but my body will
continue marking the world around me nonetheless.\textsuperscript{4} That this activity occurs while I’m fixating on some distant object must mean that I’m not paying attention to everything I’m doing, and therefore beginning to generate abstract effects. To borrow from Saussure, we could say that such effects are unmotivated, in that they conform neither to the execution of instinct (not completely, anyway) nor directly to the object of which I am aware. To build on Lacan, we could go further and say that the unconscious is structured like a language — with a crucial disclaimer: My unconscious, at least my waking unconscious, is not inside me, awaiting my curious introspection. It’s on the outside. What fills the gap is in the world.\textsuperscript{5}

As it stands, the description is no doubt simplistic. The scenario I’m painting suggests a narrowing down to a focal point, and on request we’re generally able to achieve something better than tunnel vision.\textsuperscript{6} By the same token, I don’t mean to suggest that we generate waking dreams in our peripheral vision (although that might be pleasant). The effect can be as fine-grained as attention allows. If we follow a Wittgensteinian model, in which our picture of the world is subject to higher and higher resolutions, the reportable result will never manage to provide a complete representation.\textsuperscript{7} But to this model, which is supposed to lead us to reject what cannot be pictured, we can add not only subliminal motor activity — as we investigated with the help of cup and cat — but subliminal production as well. Around (or beside or interspersed within) the view I have before me, my own unmotivated activities begin to accrue, with no particular destination in mind.

\textsuperscript{4} It’s worth remarking that Friedrich Besser, known for describing the principle of parallax, also took it upon himself to observe the inconsistent procedural motions of his colleagues as they peered through the telescope at stars, and so became the first to articulate what is known in the philosophy of science as the Personal Equation.

\textsuperscript{5} What sleeping dreams are made of, sadly, beyond the scope of this essay.

\textsuperscript{6} Although Dennett says we don’t. Dennett, Conscience Explained, 53–54.

If in promulgating this view, I’ve passed the point of no return for most philosophers of action, who take intention to have at least some minimal content preceding its execution, I can only say it’s going to get worse.8 The unmotivated nature of human activity, its existential restlessness, provides what I believe is an adequate explanation for creativity, which, after all, happens without direct intention every time. It also gives us the framework for understanding how instinct can come to be compromised. But the consequences go further, because strictly speaking, unmotivated dislocations of the kind I’m describing should arise whenever I’m paying attention to anything.

To return to language of the explicit model: Holding my attention on a star is the same operation as generating the star as a type. As I contemplate it and then renew my decision to do so, I confirm its sameness over time, which is to render my previous impression of it identical in some way to its current status, even if I notice a glint of red that I missed a moment ago. I establish the star as an identity that persists across its variations. This is exactly the bare-bones employment of the axiom schema of replacement. Meanwhile, my personal effects are already coming to be, unthematized as yet and governed only by the limits that the world provides. They may show some preponderance toward utterances, for the simple reason that oxygen is always there. Maybe I start to hum. Or, if I stand long enough in that pleasantly uncomfortable position of stargazing, I begin to scuff the ground in a distinctive way. Then my attention shifts — to a rustle in the woods — and the dislocation continues.

Here’s the point where Pandora herself might have balked. If I now direct my attention to the marks on the ground, I’m repeating the retention process and inducing another dislocation, which in turn causes yet another dislocation, and so on. Every time I hold my attention on anything — by virtue of the

8 Bratman goes so far as to claim that intentions are already in progress with the formulation of a plan. I’m claiming that an action is in progress before the intention even arises. Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
simple fact that “I” am a mathematical operator who employs the axiom of replacement—I’m furthering a chain of types in tandem with a chain of dislocations: two chains, which may or may not have any relation to each other. In the previous chapter, I promised to explain why a list of actions staged for diagonalization will keep changing, and this is it. Coincidence perpetually rearranges its own habitat.

In making the connection between unmotivated activity and the unassigned object, we’ve reconciled Alexander’s theory of evolution with colocationism. The overcrowding of our minds leads to novel motions and, for reasons that turn out to be almost mechanical, novel manifestations, which make their own demands on us in turn. Naturally (I say naturally because I consider my account of productivity to be suitably naturalized at this point), these demands begin without a predetermined destiny, and could become tools or signs, or all manner of disaster and clutter.

This is still only half the battle, though. Despite the headway we’ve made, our coincident entities still communicate not by direct address, but through an almost comic slippage from memory to motion, and this doesn’t seem like a recipe for quality control. Unmotivated activity may be adequate for the production of strange things hitherto unseen, but it’s hard to imagine that the same could hold true for reproduction. To return to our original question, then, how does a goal, once recognizable as such, come to be accomplished?

While we can’t peer back in time to observe the moment the first entity had the first pre-meditated intention, we can approach this question, using an old trick from the transcendental repertoire, by asking another one: Under what conditions could a chain of intention be initiated? How would radiance turn out to generate results besides disaster and clutter?

Suppose again that I look at a star and, as a result, absent-mindedly create a design in the dust that’s sufficiently strange to attract my curiosity. This attraction alone means that I turn my attention to the design. By the same principle we’re supposing, the very act of beholding the design, of typifying it, would initi-
ate another dislocated motion. But notice that, unlike the star, the design in the dust is within my means to alter. Suppose further then, that I do not alter the design, but instead continue to gaze at it. I can touch it, but I do not. All that’s needed now is to prolong this decision and the object will be defined by the rule “do not touch.” This, of course, is an object familiar to anthropologists of every stripe—an object that’s set apart, kept separate: a sacred object. In keeping with Meillassoux’s etymology, which traces “absolute” to its meaning of “severance,”9 I propose to call such an entity an absolute object.

An absolute object doesn’t satisfy a positive definition of intention, in the sense of “I intend x,” but it does pretty well as a double negative. “Given x, I intend not not-x.” (Or, as it’s written in logical notation, ~~~x, where a tilde means “not.”) Absolute status is simply a projection of the sameness of an object over time, with the presumption of some control over its endurance. By the rules of transcendental analysis, we’re unable to ascribe a motive for the decision in favor of this restraint. It’s plain enough, though, that the condition holds good for the advent of a great experiment in controlling the environment. Whatever the reason not to touch what I can touch, the sequence will proceed as it did when I gazed at the star, in a contagion of effects, except that I can now refuse or agree to act on a multitude of secondary effects as they spring up before me. Far from being deliberate, then, my intentions will be more like an absorption in the properties of the things, with absolute objects providing stable points of reference. If I bar myself from coming in contact with some personal effect, will it be demolished by other forces anyway? And if it is demolished, will that be something I “did?” Are there other effects I can continue to touch without fear of changing them—that I might, on the contrary, try to demolish and find still intact? Can I reconstitute an effect after it falls to decay, and if so, where is it located then—in my memory, or in the thing? If it exists in my memory, how can I stabilize that? Can I stabilize that?

9 Meillassoux, After Finitude, 28.
The propulsive nature of radiance keeps these questions from being merely academic. They’re posed to a body moving among other objects. This means that the condition of the absolute object is able to provoke *imminent* questions about intentions, the answers to which will constitute a material culture and its associated values. Over time, we could in fact expect an accumulation of intentional “pathways,” along which the next implied step would tend to be occupied by a conventional expectation. What we call mastery would then be the statistically accurate *save* of the next implied effect, while the swerve would be any divergence from this expected next type, due to the participation of two agencies in the task.

At this point, we might have a hunch where all this is going. The constant throughout the chain seems to be my personal identity, so the temptation is to fall in with Aristotle — and Kant — and award this constant the position of final cause, or in the Kantian formulation, the rational being as an end in itself. Yet the free variable, for which there is no account, is my decision to hold my attention or, just as unaccountably, to shift it. Since this decision starts the intentional chain, it occurs prior to any entity that could make it, including the persistence of me as I understand as myself. My personal identity arises with my decision to typify an object and therefore cannot be enlisted as the agent choosing in favor of holding my attention on that object. By extension, the same holds for choosing which dislocation I save and which I allow to slip into the new: I’m unable to ground this choice on an enduring personal identity.

Our account of intention now folds in with our account of coincident entities, point by point, and even gives us a little boost, because it allows us to consider productivity in terms of grounds forcing and carpentry.

With the primary decontrol, the basic procedure was to refuse to respond to a set of intended actions. Here again we see a refusal as crucial to the process, but now the refusal itself, the refusal to cause a change in \( x \), is an intention. Not only that, but the refusal to cause a change in \( x \) is, on some stupid but clear-cut level, a means of ensuring my independence from another
entity. Further, if I refuse to cause a change in $x$ that is within my power to change, then my radiance will necessarily be diverted elsewhere. So it looks like extended grounds forcing should be a mirror image of the Alexandrian procedure. Rather than assert one impossible action and refuse everything else, I refuse only one possible action and consent to the surprising world that follows.

This may seem to present yet another contradiction. How, one might ask, can I simultaneously refuse and consent to the same class of activities? Surely, this is a classic example of the excluded middle, which requires me to choose either to decontrol my actions or to separate myself from some object. But in fact, no choice is necessary, because diagonalization worked in the former case by refusing everything within a limited class, thus forcing choice onto another operator, and the same shadow moves just as surely across the latter. It’s no more possible to obey every command within a limited class that’s presented to me than it is to follow none of them at all. On the contrary, far from contradicting each other, the combination of the two procedures brings out the very point we were hoping to be able to make.

As will be recalled, in thinking “head up and forward,” we received every stimulus as it came and then forced the grounds of motor activity, until we returned by some unknown formula to an intention. But this return can never be a return to every intention. Something has to be left as not done. And this must be true whether we decenter our actions or not. There’s always something that we don’t do at the expense of what we do. So what we’re attempting now, really, is to give reiterative power to “something not done,” such that it’s not simply the vast, undefined complement of what’s intended, nor an ever-shifting pragmatic foundation for action, but something definitely not done that remains the same thing regardless of what is done. Basically, we’re adding one action into each variation of the actions we might propose, and then refusing it along with the rest.

In our pursuit of this Archimedean point, we’ve gained another advantage along the way. We no longer have to worry
about an original intention, because we no longer presume intentions to arise prior to effects. I enter into the task of separating an object with everything already at my disposal, and with my radiant proclivities already acting on my contiguous environment. This will be helpful, because — continuing to be a little dense about it — the only way to know that it’s definitively within my power to cause a change to \( x \) is to have caused some change to it. And with this knowledge in hand, the next step will be clear: to refuse to cause some further change to \( x \), because this knowledge will then also be knowledge of a thing that has the possibility of persisting without me.

The absolute object is therefore a curiously versatile thing. Normally, one thinks of an object that’s set apart as an index for some other unseen entity. Here it warrants our interest strictly for its independence from us. In fact, rather than eliciting our veneration or offering a focal point for our deepest wishes, it actually defines the challenge, from within the ontology of coincident entities, for acting on an equal footing with other objects. The challenge, let’s still call it my challenge, is this: to identify an existing class of personal effects, to alter some element \( x \) in that class such that it blocks every bridge operation for how \( x \) entails \( y \), and then to withhold my ability to further alter that element in any way that reintroduces a bridge operator other than the effect itself. This plan remains within the orbit of a virtue ethics, because the idea is to set up a structure in which there is an absolute object, and then to see if it can have no limiting relation to any action I might take within that structure. I will want to stabilize an object only long enough to start it on its journey, not to control what happens next. The theory being, if I can sustain this pressure, intentions that do not only originate from within the correlationist circle will be freed to leap to the fore.

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On one level, my task is starting to look almost easy now, since, according to the argument as it stands, I should be able to seize upon most any object and stop its becoming-for-me in mid-
stream. In fact, I’m perilously close to a campaign for magical thinking, as if I could just carry a talisman around and expect the noumenal world to announce itself to me. What I have yet to address in this regard is a certain unnerving vulnerability that radiance provokes, a vulnerability that’s closely tied up with the assertion of sameness for “something not done” — not sameness over time anymore, or rather, not only over time, but also across space. So we have one last stop to make before plunging into the wilderness of beings.

To restate the argument on the table: If my personal identity arises with the assignment of purpose to other objects, then it seems fair to say that those other objects will count in some respect as part of my identity. This view — that thought is conditional on the environment — is known as externalism, and it has the usual spectrum of positions. Those mining the Anglo-American vein may be reminded especially of the extended mind thesis, advanced by Clark and Chalmers, which holds that some objects actually do some of the thinking for us. A man named Otto, beset with Alzheimer’s, uses his notebook to find his way to a museum. Otto does not actually have the knowledge of where the museum is located; therefore, the notebook does. Such is the example, highly condensed, that Clark and Chalmers put forward to argue that Otto and the notebook exhibit parity in their ability to think.

So much resonates nicely with the function of an external bridge operator as I described it earlier, only now the operator is not just imagined as existing outside the body — it actually is outside. Although an external fact, the notebook is still part of Otto’s intention. He moves from one patch of awareness to the next, counting on it to maintain the structure of time and space for him. (Without getting too deeply into aesthetics, it’s also certainly noteworthy that the authors chose a museum as the target location, given the Herculean efforts of museum staffs the world over to preserve the sameness of artworks over time.) With colocationism, we also get the benefit, thrown in for free, of explaining why there are such things as notebooks. The production of artifacts per se is an existential fact, as a mat-
ter of radiance, for as long as I’m blessed to have two minds. My thoughts are already pushed “out there,” into things, before I can think them through. And in fact, an entire subgenre in the coincidence literature is devoted to these objects, which seem to be both statue and clay, road and pavement.

But Chalmers and Clark go further than the powers of workaday storage devices in their thesis. “And what,” they ask, “about socially-extended cognition? Could my mental states be partly constituted by the states of other thinkers? We see no reason why not, in principle.”10 Indeed, why not? The notebook, after all, stores more than just the information that Otto has put in it. The inventors of the calendar and the alphabet, the manufacturers of the paper that makes up its pages, the worker who confirms that the pages are bound, the truck driver who delivers the shrink-wrapped skids of notebooks to the store… all of these parties have extended their minds into the object, and left a mark there before ebbing. Otto benefits from the survival of these thoughts as much as he does from his own inscriptions. On this view, civilization itself can be seen an exercise in people “thinking into” objects that exist in the great outdoors.

The colocationist will tend to accept the idea of socially extended cognition early on, since the implicit and declarative minds clearly rely on each other and, moreover, even seem to foreshadow a social sensibility. Having added the corollary of radiance, we now also have a means of engaging collective agency right and proper, not just as an interesting idea about Otherness entertained from the comfort of our own idealist thoughts, but as a disruption in our sincere endeavors when other people actually do show up.

Usually, the subject of collective agency is introduced with a decision, as if beginning from a blank slate. “Suppose a group of people decide to build a house…” Radiance counsels us to approach the matter from a different angle, however, because it entails that activities come first and intentions follow. I’m al-

other grounds

ready in the midst of a welter of intentions, some of which are my own and some of which belong to others, before I take it into my head to start building a house. Normally, I’m not aware of this. It doesn’t occur to me that others have been “thinking into” my activities, or I into theirs, so long as I can proceed with my own thoughts and activities. It’s only when something goes awry that the chains of intentions become apparent to me. Here one immediately recalls Heidegger’s hammer, which, when broken, reveals the truth undergirding the world. But this isn’t where the argument is headed anymore. When my hammer breaks, it doesn’t illuminate being. It reveals shoddy craftsmanship, and behind that, someone who wasn’t thinking into the hammer for me.

This kind of unveiling can put socially extended cognition through some rigorous paces. Suppose I go to the hardware store to complain, pieces of a former tool in hand. To my surprise, the clerk just pops the head back on the handle and hands it back to me. “It isn’t broken,” says my service representative, quickly turning adversary. “You just have to reattach the head.”

For the first time, I notice some kind of flanges on the handle that I’ve never associated with hammers before. And the head does seem to stay on. “But…” I stammer, “won’t it just fall apart next time?” To which comes the reply: “It depends on how much force you use.”

Ah, yes, how much force I use. The definition of “broken” has now become an annoying borderline case, in which our social extensions are actually mutually exclusive. I’m trying to implant an action in the clerk (to provide me with a new hammer), while the clerk is trying to implant a different action in me (to accept the original hammer and go away). There are two different chains of intentions that crossed once, briefly, and have proceeded onward to different ends. To put it another way, the hammer is part of two larger objects that are differently composed.

So much might be dismissed as a nuisance of modern life. But now suppose that I go home and start to work on my house again. Bang, bang, bang — I’m making solid progress on some renovations in my living room when swoop, off flies the hammerhead again, arcing across the room, and hitting… my cat. In
fact, it catches him right in the temple as he jumps off my desk and kills him on the spot!

The consequences of multiple intentions suggested by this incident threaten to pour some fairly cold water on the project of decentering the human. If I accept the differing definitions of a working hammer, I accept a world broken into subjective parts, in which everyone interprets the hammer as they like and the hammer itself goes unseen, like the neglected child of divorce. Not only is this precisely the kind of misguided conversation that the ooo project strenuously seeks to avoid, it also seems to ask for a resolution, now that my cat is a casualty. Yet if I seek consensus on the definition of the hammer, I find no answer in the hammer, which, unlike my arms and legs, has no clear-cut place to which it belongs. As an extended mind, the hammer is, in a very real sense, numb. Its “hammerness” has no negentropy of its own. Sensation will be of little assistance to me here, because the hammer’s hammerness exists only in its exo-relations, which the clerk and I have discovered to be less than congruent. If I reject the subjective position, then, the only obvious recourse is to petition some encompassing entity inside which our differing ends can be squared up. That is, some external agent the clerk and I invest with the power to render judgment about the persistence or change of an object over time — an arbiter to settle the case.

This kind of “for us,” the judicial “for us,” is probably desirable for most people, even those who seek to overcome correlationist “for us” on philosophical grounds. We look to the voice that speaks “for us” to resolve the many squabbling “for me’s,” sometimes in cases as small-time as the definition of a tool, sometimes in cases with a lot more in the game. (Fill in the blank: “Jerusalem is the extended mind of ___.”) Interestingly, the figure of arbiter as I conceive it yields more than a passing resemblance to Harman’s idea of a vicar. According to

11 It’s all but impossible to suppress the image here of André Breton convening his grand councils to determine who was a true Surrealist and who failed to make the grade.
Harman, the withdrawal of objects throughout the universe immediately leads the problem of how they can ever interact. His solution, which he calls vicarious causation, is to introduce an object—a vicar—that contains them both and so allows them to interact on its interior. Substitute “arbiter” for “vicar” and you get much the same result. An arbiter can give a ruling that we both believe brings our intentions into relation with each other and therefore causes us to reconcile our conflicting compositions of the hammer. We will think the same thoughts into the hammer hereafter.

Or so the theory would have it. Of course, the arbitration system will run into familiar difficulties. I can probably find a serviceable candidate for my complaint, and if our arbiter gets entangled in the dispute, recusal from the case is presumably an option, but logically speaking there can be no final arbiter as to what all objects “really are,” because eventually no more recusals will be available and the final arbiter will end up as one of those seeking arbitration.

It might be objected here that no final arbiter is needed, that a temporary arbiter could just as well arise for each occasion and each object in dispute, simply because there is no such thing as “all objects.” Yet we do encounter this figure of the final arbiter, generally coming forth with a pretense to extending its mind into every body in its dominion, in order to undertake its intentions (which should probably not surprise us, since personal effects are by their nature “loose” in the world). How this court of last resort plays out has been well tracked under the heading of structural agency. The judgment as to the status of personal effects can only be imparted through the medium of other personal effects, which are necessarily manifested locally, yet need to communicate a total domain. By this route, we end up with Althusser’s policeman, who—on finding me conducting a

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13 While the medieval aspect of this solution is appealing, the arbiters for hammers are likely to find themselves at odds with the arbiters for nails soon enough, and to seek a larger union.
mock funeral for my cat outside the hardware store—hails me in the midst of my spectacle and makes me turn around, thereby constituting me as a subject of the state. The policeman’s uniform is the extended mind of the final arbiter and, in appearing from an unambiguously exterior vantage point, causes my double agency to fuse into a single subject, a coincident entity no more... an in-dividual.

In seeking a mathematical basis for coincident entities, we identified an anti-foundational maze within the declarative mind, and we met up with it again in the circularity of personal identity and manufactured object. Now, having expanded our inquiry to include other minds, we find it obstinately in force at the level of material culture *writ large.* Moreover, we’ve reached the point where the personal effect of the final arbiter, which we might call an *absolute personal effect,* brings together in lockstep the two forms of indifference to identification that I mentioned at the outset—indifference to the signifier and to the signified. The name of the effect now has no substitute, nor does the effect itself. Everything converges onto an exact expression of agency.

That’s one way to solve the problem of causation within the sphere of human long-suffering striving. Strictly speaking, though, the finality of the final arbiter brings with it all the instability that comes with the prospect of self-belonging. The shakiness of the contradiction will show up at the top, where power turns capricious with great regularity, and, because the totalization that provokes self-belonging is simply unattainable, again...


16 The swerve is technically not a consequence of self-belonging, but rather of coincidence. That said, the swerve will be inexplicable to anyone who takes self-evident awareness as proof against colocated agents. Witness the impotent rage of the powerful.
at the bottom, where, no matter how precise the command or how willing the supplicant, some amount of swerve is always possible. The final arbiter can only give the appearance of causation, priming every startle with a master predicate until its magisterial will takes on the look and feel of a constant fact. Sensation (let it be fear potentiation) is made to do more work than it can handle, giving rise, as Althusser and others have pointed out, to a need to reproduce the stimulus over and over, in order to fend off the entropic event of the collective identity.

What radiance tells us is that we can’t hope to practice object orientation in isolation from each other, because we’re always already becoming entangled in each other’s intentions. The encounter with being is to be sought, not at an authentic remove from the madding crowd, but precisely in the everydayness where our equality with other beings is most at risk. Yet once so entangled there, we end up having to choose between relativism and righteousness, subjectivity and sovereignty. So the question returns with a vengeance: How can we ever expect to reach an agreement about the exo-relations of our personal effects without invoking an absolute personal effect along the way?

The keen eye will note that science aims to satisfy this very desire: to present results that anyone can replicate, such that the observer is indifferent to identification. No doubt science has trouble when it comes to vague objects, which are broken for one person and merely mishandled for another, and it certainly stumbles, as I insisted earlier, on the question of what it’s like to be a person. On other hand, it does a pretty good job at demonstrating that there can be observers indifferent to identification, and this finding is no small thing. For his part, Alexander has shown us that any person, regardless of what it’s like to be a person, can refuse to respond at least in some part to some stimulus, and from there undertake a procedure that forces the grounds of another being into view. Grounds forcing puts each practitioner in the same ontological position, not of finding oneself, but of finding the outside, where the outside is not an object of scientific interest singled out in advance, but rather whatever the wilderness brings. Yet the procedure continues to be empirical
with respect to the observer’s access to this wilderness. It’s not a metaphor or an analogy. It can be tested. It can be traced, lost, rediscovered — all of which is to say it can be *practiced*, as one practices the piano, for as long as one does.

In this respect, I think extended grounds forcing holds promise as an empirical venture, provided we can dispel the assumption that the observer exists only in the moment when a reproducible experiment is in progress. The most advantageous line of attack is, in fact, not on the isolated instance of a lab result, where replaceability comes cheap, but on the bridge operators that we build for ourselves in order to cross the many disconnected observations of our lives. Since these bridge operators are external to each of us, because what fills the gap is in the world, we pass from the presumption of circularity, in which I construct that which constructs me, to a less well-defined terrain, in which I am only one of many who “think into” that which constructs me. In the case of the absolute object, which is a simply a bridge operator openly admitted to be an artifact, I will have company when I abstain from altering it.

Extended grounds forcing will therefore call for an absolute object that intersects us severally, across our multitudinous flickerings of awareness. To meet the absolute personal effect head-on, it will also have to exist without any privileged claim as either token or type, an effect that reads nothing personal back to anyone, that prompts no intention and therefore simply exists, right where it is, in its unadorned factuality — an image of radiance *simpliciter*. My wager is that this set of conditions can be constructed and therefore tested, that the ability to force the grounds of our given intentions, those choices we do not choose, will be within our means if we can design an object to short-circuit reference at exactly those points where the absolute personal effect is reproduced — where unsubstantiated necessity, as we supposed in the beginning, is expressed as imminent.

Or rather, we can expect such a thing to test *us*…

In a sense, the idea behind extended grounds forcing is quite obvious: I can achieve mutual independence with a thing by avoiding physical contact with it. One could think of this ab-
stention (which, wickedly, is the root meaning of the term *epoche*) as an imitation of withdrawal: I replay the inaccessibility of an object at the level of its local manifestation, so as to prove my lack of access to its virtual being. This independence can then be modulated to verify whether I can interact with the object in some way that doesn't fundamentally change its status as a type. The tricky part comes in stopping shy of the next step, which is, usually, to protect this absolute object from others and whatever ends they may have in store for it. To do that, after all, would be to make it an extension of my personal identity again, when its independence from me is the ongoing goal I originally set for myself.

Any absolute object worth its salt will therefore be something altogether common, in both senses of the word. It will have a halting point, in the sense that it will be within my power to approach it, to recognize it and, crucially, to reproduce it. At the same time, it will lack a halting point among our shared exo-relations, insofar as it serves as an extension of any declarative mind. Not being “for” anything or anyone in particular, there won’t be any reason within the constraints of necessity to preserve it. Yet for all that, if it survives, it will have done so at the risk of destruction by parties other than just myself. And if it is destroyed, it can always be reintroduced without concern for narrative timing, since the stakes for reproducing it are low by design.

Extended grounds forcing does of course presuppose the possibility of shared interests by more than one party, to which I say: So be it. Possibility, in the larger sense, is exactly what we want to test. If nothing else, we know that an interest in shared interests is generally shared, because we see it so often when interests are at odds. The rarity is the straightforward commonality come to be.

My watchword going forward, then, will be to locate those shared obligatory practices that capture an object in mid-flight, and then to subtract every hint of an absolute personal effect from that object’s composition. If what I’m advancing is correct, the result will be a set that’s larger than our mutual obligations, because the object that results won’t impose anything beyond
the existence of obligation as such. And from there it will be but a short step, I hope, to a more general unraveling: the gradual emergence of entities from our deontic hold on them, as the iterative suspension of our ends gives way to a shared outside—a genuinely public domain that, despite the vast amounts of intellectual capital spent on it, we really know very little about: A case of bone-handled toothbrushes, a mountain range on its first day of existence, three black ribbons in the grass…