Other Grounds: Breaking Free of the Correlationist Circle

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Public Things

The idea of a republic is anything but new to philosophy. Ever since Plato fleshed out his version of one, the concept has been visited with a regularity that would generally indicate a dead horse no longer worth treating in a politically incorrect manner. I have my own peculiar reason, however, to think there’s breath in it yet. While the word “republic” suggests the double structure of “the people again,” it actually derives from the Latin res publica, where res translates as “a substantive, concrete object.” A republic, for the Roman, was not a concept at all, but a physical entity: a public thing.

In the following chapter, I’d like to take a tour of some objects that show potential as public things in this older, stranger sense. Some already exist in presentable form. Others can be projected or imagined by varying existing objects. In any event, the idea will be to force the grounds of an object for a class of humans (mathematical operators capable employing the axiom of replacement) — to render an object public, without falling prey to the snares of self-belonging. As before, when we scrutinized Alexander’s thought experiment, a key move will be to restrict the replacement operation, but now the monotype will be extended to an object “out there,” and therefore available to a class of coincident entities, any one of whom can force the object to exist on its own grounds by a refusal to incorporate it into any end. Such a result, if it occurs, I will call objective, and, because objectivity entails that an object occupy its own place in relation to humans, I will go on the original meaning of the word ethos.
as “habitat” and regard the result as ethical. In my book, objectivity is ethical.¹

This exercise will plainly be fragile at all times, since anyone can alter the composition of any object at will, simply by declaring some member of the class as its foundational nexus. The exo-relations of a public thing will have a hard time surviving the comment section of an online news story. The exercise won’t be absolutely fragile, either, though, because objects as they exist independently of us aren’t instantly perishable anymore than they are inherently permanent. We know that they present degrees of resistance to their destruction, even if we can’t predict the degree in advance. They have some degree of negentropy. In this sense, the carpentry I have in mind will expand the potential for grounds forcing by enlisting matter to do a share of the work that others might reserve for human thinkers only. A public thing is like Otto’s notebook, with the twist that we count on an object to think itself for us. But it should also be said that the externalist view I’ve adopted does not let us off the hook. It only claims parity between internal and external operators — and parity is in fact an excellent synonym for equal footing among beings. Our share of the work, should we choose to accept it, will be to methodically suspend the linking of one thing to another — to practice thinking the independent identity over time of an effect we’ve lodged somewhere in the world.

This tension between outer and inner, between the behavior of matter and our ability to weave that behavior into an iterative procedure, will determine the efficacy of each public thing. Before we didn’t have to worry about this tension so much, because the object was the body, which is always there (making the body, in a sense, the gateway to the extended mind). A public thing, on the other hand, is external by its nature, so we will have to admit to uneven access to it, and then see what can be done to “bring it to zero” and so initiate a diagonalization.

¹ As I hope I have made clear, an objective ethics will be also be a virtue ethics, in the sense that it maintains a practice without predicting specific ethical problems.
For much the same reasons, the examples I’ve found don’t obey readymade exposition. I can only draw from my own corner of the universe, with its indigenous attractions. As a matter of choice (based inevitably on convenience, as choices will be), my plan is to start from a consensus between two parties—a pact—building up to larger classes, and from there to classes of classes. This choice appears to project a path of increasing technological complexity, passing through the principles of possession, dispossession and circulation, and finally to a slant departure from them all. But for all the appearance of a cumulative strategy, each of these thought experiments is conceived as being independent of the primary decontrol, and, by the same count, independent of each other. There is no progression to mastery, nor is there any downside that I can see to pursuing them in combination.

The Shape of Agreements To Come

Throughout much of Western history, when two parties wanted to enter into a contract with each other, they undertook a procedure called indenture. The principle was quite simple. The agreement was written twice on the same piece of parchment, the parchment cut in two in a somewhat haphazard fashion, and one half given to each party. The resulting cut created unique tooth-like shapes (the Latin for “tooth” being dent-, therefore “indenture”) that formed a perfect match between copies. In this way, an agreement could be confirmed at a later date simply by putting the documents together. Sometimes, the terms were written out in triplicate, with a third copy given to a neutral party, just in case someone lost a copy, or cheated.

Indenture was often an article of servitude, drawn up when some poor soul was unable to pay a debt. Even today, well into the age of paperless contracts, the term “indentured servant” carries some of its original sting. But now imagine a document of indenture, torn in two as per the custom, with one minor, seemingly trivial change: Nothing is written on it. Not having any terms, such a document would have an entirely different
status from the traditional one. In fact, its terms would be precisely those under which its validity was tested and the terms of that validity found to fail.2

As it turns out, blank indenture is pretty good suggesting an intention without providing one. We can see intuitively that the match between the two halves establishes something true about matter: The match indicates agreement. We can see, too, that this agreement is made not by declaration, but by a procedure, for which, oddly, we can give no account. The contract is just itself, in the world, independent of its parties. It also allows for a fairly wide field of types of contractual partners. When investigating the behavior of mirror neurons in macaque monkeys, scientists have discovered a significantly high firing rate in response to… ripping a sheet of paper in half.3 We might feel emboldened, then, to believe that the range of a public thing might be expanded to include other species. (Going forward, I’ll just let that possibility hang.)

The blank indenture also exhibits the subtle connection between foundation and choice we identified as a hallmark of the implicit mind: It ranges over the domain of potential agreements and disagreements without necessitating any of them. If you were to assert the necessity of the object, you would have to do so on some grounds not given by the object. You could never hold up your half and air any grievances safeguarded by the contract, because the contract safeguards nothing. The object forces the thought of agreement to a position of contingency.

Things start to get iffy, however, if we try to identify a blank indenture’s exo-relations. The persuasiveness of its physical

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2 One can find a precedent for the blank indenture in the Greek symbolon, which captured the same principle of physically agreeing parts in a broken clay object. I chose to consider the indenture as a potential public thing instead of the symbolon because, despite the great temptation to follow the etymology to the word “symbol,” pieces of paper are more readily available than clay pots.

public things

match seems to apply only to itself, with no obvious relation to any terms. To illustrate the point, we can cast it as a Latour litany:

*Street lamps, medieval armor, calendar, blank indenture*

The mere inclusion of the indenture on this list does little to challenge the necessity of any particular relation to the objects. On the contrary, some of the objects appear as types without tokens. It would be a little odd, for example, to argue about street lamps as a concept. In short, we find ourselves without a formal context on which our unnecessary object might operate. This, it should be said, is a characteristic of Latour litanies in general. By their nature, they present declarative rather than procedural terms, leaving the reader with nothing to diagonalize.

We might expect to improve the situation, then, by shifting our attention to the carpentry of a specific case in which two parties have a relation to the token instances of objects. Since I entered into just such a contract with a co-worker once, I’ll show the new list accordingly:

*Street lamps, medieval armor, calendar, blank indenture entered into by Jeff and Dave*

Now we begin to have a structure with some bite to it. Both Jeff and I might have an opinion about medieval armor, but it’s not likely to be a strong one. The same cannot be said for our relation to the calendar, because, at the time we entered into this experimental contract, we worked together, I as the author of the instructions on the calendar, he as one who carried them out. One jot of my magic marker could impose an undue burden on him, or make his day pleasant and productive. So our litany is no longer hypothetical. We’ve moved from the assertion of a flat ontology to the realm of practice, where some objects are closer than others.

It seems fair to say that our blank indenture acted as a kind of external conscience for Jeff and I during the time we worked together. Our complementary objects gave us a precedent to re-
fuse to disagree (or to go ahead and disagree) as equals, when-
ever either of us arrived at a crossroads between consensus and discord. Part and parcel to this freedom was a predisposition to break down the steps involved in a task — to forego the descriptive label of some given goal in favor of a closer discussion of the smaller increments involved. Our orientation shifted from “knowing that” to “knowing how.”

Still, the blank indenture turns out to be useful mostly as counterfactual example of a monotype, because it never quite gives us the rigor of grounds forcing we would like. First and foremost, it seems to lack opportunities for iteration. At what point, after all, do these whimsical scraps actually enter into the rest of our activities? With the Alexandrian directions, the command “head up and forward” can always be invoked, because — quite simply — wherever you go, there you are. The blank indenture, on the other hand, seems to “happen” only once, and nothing in it indicates any rule for reuniting its parts or avoiding their reunion, for preserving them or abandoning them to the elements, or any other action on them. It doesn’t make any sense to believe that our matching pieces of paper will just magically appear before our eyes whenever we want to force the grounds of our relationship onto the wider context around us. Our options, in fact, are either to remember them in absen-
tia, at the sacrifice of any procedural engagement, or to keep them physically at hand — say, in our respective personal spaces — which limits the procedural engagement to the two of us.

By the nature of the object, a blank indenture encourages a procedure based on possession. This is easy to see if we imagine tearing the paper into smaller bits to include more participants, a strategy sure to become daunting as the puzzle pieces approach the size of postage stamps, to say nothing of the quandaries posed by non-neighboring pieces that form no match at all. It just doesn’t work very well except for pairs of participants.

That said, it does frame the capacity for objectivity at the limited level of a partnership. Identical wedding rings, sufficiently designed to lack referents, could, for example, objectify an ethics for their bearers. Whatever pre-conceived notions two part-
ners may bring to a marriage, the objects on their fingers, which really do exist, act as a termless agreement that systematically outstrips each of those notions in turn. No one knows the limit of the contract. No doubt it could be argued that wedding rings aren’t crucial for a relationship to function. If one of the partners misplaced hers, it wouldn’t necessarily signal the dissolution of the pact. But that’s exactly the point. The partners wear them even though they’re not necessary.

Deflating as it may seem, objects as familiar as these can lay bare the reality of things—and almost certainly are doing so right now, in unsung locations the world over. This kind of event is underway often, using plainly traditional carpentry, without the windfall of a rare opening onto the void.

Of course, the implication here is that “identical objects as pacts” will be subject to the same constraints of limited possession as indenture is. But are they? Let’s look at the pluses and minuses using another example. Not long ago, my elder son took a fierce interest in a certain kind of bracelet-weaving that some of his friends were learning. I don’t know how many children across the globe were immersing themselves in this activity, but the loom was commercially available on the cheap, so one would imagine the numbers were fairly high. There seemed to be no romantic angle to making them, and no fictional character inciting further purchases. It was just a fad that bubbled up and passed, with no particular goal attached. Given the parameters I’ve set out, such fads, in which no end is evident, satisfy at least the basics of grounds forcing. What’s missing, on one hand, is some explicit built-in structure to prevent the assignment of a function linking personal identity to possession—to cliques within the fad population—and on the other, some matrix of obligation to hold the activity in place.

Leaving Out the Most Important Part

Well then, if possessing objects gives rise to issues of personal-identity assignment, what about the opposite? Suspending for a moment the emotional overtones associated with the word,
and thinking more specifically about spatial relations, we could train our sights on a procedure that excludes an object from a class and leaves the inclusion of humans in that class as a free variable. After all, we originally identified the chain of intention as beginning with an absolute object that we choose not to touch, even though we can. Abstention could, in principle, help to solve the problem of self-belonging by turning custody into a negative. Instead of “everyone here has x equally,” we would get “none of us here has x.”

We don’t have to invent such cases from scratch. If you went looking for large, decentralized classes of humans, it wouldn’t take long before you came across a familiar organization that also began as a pact between two parties, and has since grown to provide a remarkably developed version of a public thing, based on just this kind of inversion.

While Alcoholics Anonymous has often been branded as an evil cult, my exposure to it suggests something closer to the description given by one of its founders — a “benign anarchy.” According to the canonical version of its genesis, Bill Wilson was unable to achieve lasting sobriety until he met Dr. Bob Smith and they agreed to help each other to banish alcohol from their lives. This agreement, made between self-declared equals, looks at first glance like an ordinary pact, but in fact it both excluded an object and decentered foundation in a single stroke. How to maintain the exclusion while maintaining its lack of a center then became the basis for everything that followed.

Among their first strategies was to radicalize their idea of time. Like the body, addiction is always present, and for the alcoholic, the stimulus to drink is always imminent. But then, so is the ability to refuse to respond to this stimulus. Bill W. and Dr. Bob, as they came to call themselves, realized that, although they couldn’t control their addiction through a declared goal,

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4 As one might guess, my personal communications on the subject are anonymous, but see Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001).
they could always tell themselves, “I do not have to drink the next drink.” They could refuse to respond to the stimulus, and track their sobriety at the moment they were speaking. As this strategy started to work, the declaration took on the form of a partially ordered set, much like Alexander’s “all at once, one after the other,” but here expressed in a longer sequence: \{\text{now}\} \leq \{\text{now, today}\} \leq \{\text{now, today, total number of days of accumulated sobriety}\}.

Insofar as the AA member can insert this monotype (“I do not have to drink the next drink”) into any sequence of events, we can clearly recognize the procedure of grounds forcing. As the alcoholic reiterates it and stays sober “one day at a time,” while also counting the cumulative days of continuous sobriety, her daily actions are forced to unfold in a way that she can longer choose in advance. The procedure renders the objective independence of the alcoholic and the alcohol from each other on an iterative, ongoing basis. As before, the ethics amounts to a virtue ethics, in that good results are presumed to come from the initial affirmation of a value, here the affirmation of the separation from a contingent thing. The set of actions can be brought to zero, and so can be diagonalized, and the diagonalized act, whatever it may be, can always be paired with the explicit action of “not drinking.”

These aspects of AA obtain at the level of an individual. Where the tradition begins to function more clearly as a public thing is in the use of space. AA members don’t presume the solution to imminent need to be always at hand, but instead go to a location — the so-called rooms — to attend meetings. In this way, they solve the problem that arises if a public thing is a moveable object. We’re no longer talking about an object that belongs to coincident entities. It’s the coincident entities, the humans, who are contained in the object. Yet for all that, membership in the space is not guarded or regulated in any way. There are no written lists of attendance or registration records, and there are no membership consequences for “going out to do more research.”
as returning to drink is called. One simply starts “counting days” again — or doesn’t.\footnote{The physical separation from an object, accomplished through the formation of a group in which each individual “I”-intention seeks to further that separation, might provide new material for the study of “we”-intentions. For investigations along this line, see Michael Wilby, “Subject, Mode and Content in We-intentions,” in \textit{Phenomenology and Mind} (2012), http://philpapers.org/archive/WILSMA-4.pdf (accessed February 24, 2015).}

Granted, some of the tenets of AA may seem to violate our prohibition on self-belonging, such as its emphasis on a religious experience and the associated affirmation of a deity. On closer inspection, however, the presumption of a set of all sets dissolves. This dissolution follows directly from the rule of unrestricted membership. Although the organization began by invoking a Christian god, practical experience caused its founding element to be recast as “a higher power as we understood it,” because, so the lore has it, the relation of membership only functioned when it was member-defined. As a result, even if some members define the group as theistic, the “contract,” such as it is, still allows for an inner model of the group to be constructed without resorting to such a predicate. One does not have to declare allegiance to anything or anyone, or even to attend meetings for that matter; desire alone is sufficient. While it might seem clever to point out that a higher power is not necessarily the highest power, that is, in fact, how the set theory of AA plays out. As a result, the tradition defies the kind of declarative totalization often associated with monotheism.

\textit{Leaving Out Many of the Most Important Parts}

A great deal of AA’s clarity derives from the absence of degrees in its excluded object. One either absorbs alcohol into the bloodstream or does not. There is no middle ground. This appearance of the law of the excluded middle and the ongoing inability to secure it through willpower is what definitively establishes the axiom of choice outside the declarative mind and reorganizes the needs of a sober life into an iterative set. Obviously, most
people can’t be so definitively cornered. Even organizations patterned after AA don’t generally enjoy the same level of stringency. Members of Overeaters Anonymous, for example, still have to eat, and their ability to force independence from at least one class of objects is attenuated accordingly. So we might wonder if grounds forcing that excludes a particular object from a class is a specialized case.

It’s certainly thought-provoking in this regard that among the very earliest characteristics of human behavior was a prohibition on eating, or sometimes even touching, one specific kind of animal or plant. Once again we return to the notion of an absolute object initiating the chain of intention. The totemic taboo, as this ban has been retroactively called, prevailed across the spectrum of non-agricultural cultures and, in addition to the ban on contact, often involved a declared kinship with the totemic entity. A century ago, a fair amount of ink was spilled explaining totemism and taboos, until the subject proved intractable and the scholarly community moved on. Yet our accrued findings might shed new light on the practice, especially if we regard it not as a fixed structure, as the tendency has been, but simply as an available strategy for resolving the anxiety of radiance. For the totemist as much as the alcoholic, after all, the observance of the taboo stabilizes a baseline fact: If I belong to the fox clan, then my body does not come in contact with a fox.

Such a parallel might seem superficial, but since we’re concerned with carpentry rather than immutable structures, we can afford to be curious. We can afford, for example, to think about the stakes. We can see that the alcoholic is bent on self-destruction, and that the turn to recovery techniques is based on survival, even if personal will is renounced. But what drives the totemist to follow this same counterintuitive rule?

A clue may come from what we’ve learned from the axiom schema of replacement. For all the attention paid to the basis and motivation for identifying with a totemic being, one interesting fact has been overlooked: The totem is invariably not a specific being, but a type of being. The prohibition is not against
eating *that* fox, but against eating foxes *per se*. If I submit on this basis — brashly maybe, but there it is — that the totemic taboo reveals the dim appearance of indifference to identification in the human object, and the remote onset of our coincident entities. Such a hypothesis might help to explain why totemism seems to have appeared without a decent explanation from its practitioners. When interviewed by sociologists in the heyday of structuralism, totemic subjects generally had no good answer as to when the behavioral pattern began. It was just “always that way.” For our part we may add: It was always that way because the reporter — the latecomer coincident entity — came to be along with the report. On the flip side, one can better understand the belief, pervasive throughout totemic cultures, that a violation of the taboo resulted in instant death. So long as the fox and the fox-human remained materially separate, an intentional relation to the world was vouchsafed. That’s what was at stake: the entropic event of the account, at a time when there was very little account at all. Eat the totem and you — the declarative you — go to pieces.

Note, too, that the taboo was apparently not always enough on its own to prevent disaster. The other taboo that frequently appeared alongside the ban on touching the totem was the prohibition on incest. In light of our inquiry, we can advance that this bias toward exogamy — marrying outside one’s own totem — was an additional “found” strategy for decentering the declarative mind. Rather than being strictly instinctively based, it was a way of preventing the *name* of the totem from totalizing the human type. By definition, the totemic entities notionally

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6 Freud mentions the assignment of the totem to a type, by way of quoting J.G. Frazer: “[a]s distinguished from a *fetich* [sic], a totem is never an isolated individual but a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects.” Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: Vintage, 1946), 134. While it’s pleasing to see such a tidy list, the connection between mathematical classes and objects has not, to my knowledge, previously been made in the literature on totemism.
paired in a conjugal union — say, fox and sparrow — could have no biological result, and therefore could not be unified according to their own terms. While the totem-exogamy structure clearly did not allow for the unrestricted inclusion of members, since it followed a strict rule of progeny, it did provide a means of accounting for “everyone” without closing the system. The substitution formula *par excellence* — the name — could not be used to describe a set of all sets. There was no species called “man.”

While the causes driving the demise of totemism are beyond the scope of this inquiry, the fragility of its membership structure is easy to see. My admittedly armchair theory is that domestication — which from a totemist perspective involved nothing less than “adults breastfeeding from the relatives” — was a violent game changer. The conquest of other beings was just too much of a shock. *And still is.* There is a way in which the appropriation of all things and the correlation of all things are linked, in which an object “for us” comes to be treated as existing for us.

In this respect, we can assume that now, as then, any practice can always be overrun by a stronger system. When the state *orders* someone to attend AA meetings, for example, as sometimes happens, its principle of unrestricted membership summarily collapses.

It’s at this point that the pessimists appear to have the stronger argument: All roads lead to Rome. Then again, if that’s where they lead, maybe the thing to do is go there. If excluding an object limits the range of participants as much as sharing one does, we might consider an object that can be either possessed or surrendered — and that currently enjoys the status of the expression of imminent necessity.

*What To Do with Those Pennies*

It’s a striking fact that, in an age when money is said to define all things, it circulates almost not at all. More and more, financial exchanges take place digitally, beyond the engagement of the implicit mind, while the bank note and the coin are treated like relics of the past. Of course, there’s no reason to believe that
yesterday’s way should have lasted forever. Bank notes themselves are a fairly recent invention, and coins, though older, did not come to us fresh from the Big Bang. Nonetheless, an object that passes from hand to hand throughout a wide population is practically tailor-made for a study in objective ethics. The next stop on our speculative tour, then, will not involve an appeal to nostalgia so much as a glimpse into a function that a circulating object may yet come to have: an inner model of cash.

On one level, bills and coins are specific tokens, each to themselves. One can know that this exact thing, with its unique serial number, has been handled by others before, and will be again. The brute materiality of cash has instilled the understandable belief that it is not entirely sanitary. On the other hand, it has also served to join large reaches of matter into a sprawling web-like colocation, long before the handiwork of spiders became a popular metaphor. This extended colocation, as it were, has historically involved a clear demarcation of the possession and dispossession of an object external to oneself. One accepts cash physically and surrenders it just as physically, and so the object circulates… physically.

Oddly, one can also isolate a level at which cash lacks reference. One need not be literate to recognize a dollar bill. Its identity is constituted by a precise design and the material on which that design is fixed. This precision of design elements allows cash to be falsified: There is something that it is and something that it’s not. It’s not only strongly a token, but also strongly a type.

So cash ought to be the best bridge operator one can imagine. It has a form that by general decree can’t be altered, it travels

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everywhere, and there’s wide consensus as to its validity. One could go so far as to say that currency secures a relation between objects and rational numbers at the level of our ongoing intentions. There’s just one bothersome detail. Out of its design, which would be a mere shape or bald presentation if we were somehow deprived of our personal identity, there appears a building, a star, a face. The object is a representation for something else.

And here comes that problem again. In a domain of objects defined by object \( x \), object \( x \) is supposed to define all of the objects in the domain, yet at the very least some physical act must be employed to produce \( x \) as distinct from \( \sim x \), that \( x \) is \( \sim \sim x \), and moreover, to verify that it continues to be \( \sim \sim x \) between time 1 and time 2. Some entity must therefore define the defining entity — in this case, a human somewhere to guard against counterfeit. The OOO case for humans as objects is particularly strong here. It makes more sense to categorize the human as an object than not to do so, because categorizing the human as an object exposes monetization for what it is — a case of Russell’s paradox.

Any entity that defines a defining object must hold a contradictory place in an account where common sense is to prevail. There is no getting out of it. Currency is an absolute personal effect, which can never completely stabilize the very numerical array it exists to put right. Thus one sees extravagant allegories of the issuer’s origin, generally referencing some moment when no law was in effect (war, divinity, etc.), as the grounds for its authority. Thus too, displays of its authority in which, in some cases, the absolute personal effect can be falsified only on pain of death.

That’s pretty rich stuff. Let’s unpack it a little.

When I assert that currency secures a relation between objects and rational numbers, I don’t mean that currency determines a numerical value through some sort of animistic miracle. I mean simply that currency allows for a rational number to be assigned to matter in a relation of belonging, insofar as it functions as an external bridge operator. In fact, we can also see a connection here to our time-honored standby, the axiom
of choice. As will be recalled, the axiom of choice says that for any collection of non-empty bins, one can choose at least one element from each bin. In a situation where currency circulates, one can, likewise, choose a number corresponding to any object presented without knowing in advance how many instances of this object there are. You don’t need to know how many apples exist in the world before setting a price for your own. Your number may be too high to move them, or too low to make a profit, but you can come up with one, because, as has oft been said, everything has its price. If you haggle with a customer, you won’t end up at a price with an endless remainder, even if you extend a credit line. No one is ever going to have to pay you π.

So the issuer, by minting a currency, is guaranteeing the soundness of arithmetic for the material world in the next, so-far-unlived moment. The soundness of arithmetic certainly seems like a good thing, and one can see why advocates of the free market tacitly or openly appeal to the clarity of the rational numbers. In the elegant sheen of digits, everything seems to make sense. But if what I’m saying is true, the guarantee of rational numbers introduces irrationality elsewhere within the system. Anyone can in effect owe the issuer an endless decimal like π, because the issuer, as authenticator of the currency, belongs to the range of circulation while behaving as if it doesn’t, and so can decide as it likes when a debt is paid.

History has seen various methods of resolving this fundamental problem, none of them, in my view, successful. We’ve already noted the reference to supernatural origins. The attempt to commodify the universe seems to reach a limit when it comes to inaccessible objects like stars, allowing issuers at least to dodge the problem of self-belonging. But then, it’s hard to maintain one’s descent from Alpha Centauri. This may be why currencies sometimes reference an abstract principle in language instead—say, a transcendent deity, or Progress. Of course, these abstractions will have a different meaning for the issuer and its people, because they simply have no objectivity in
the sense I have defined the term. They exist differently in differ-
ent humans.8

The opposite problem arises if the issuer evokes ties to the
land, by placing an image of, say, a native tree or landscape on
a bank note. The bounded space of a nation solves the relation
of belonging, in that its members can be reduced to a nominally
finite head count in a finite space, but it still gives the issuer
no means of resolving the self-belonging actor — unless an out-
sider should materialize, ready to invade that space. The out-
sider seems to solve the problem, because it relieves the issuer
of the burden of asserting the totality of sets. Under the threat
of a common enemy, which actually has to be contextualized as
the native tree or landscape under threat, one can find a sense
of purpose. But at this point, the “someone else” accorded the
grounds for the axiom of choice also threatens one’s physical
existence. The rest is theater: Anyone who takes on the job of au-
thentication will be beholden to enforce the sanctity of $2 + 2 = 4$
on an illogical basis.

While a world currency might look tempting as a way out of
this problem, it too would only function through the arbitrary
creation of a nonsensical exterior. It’s certainly ironic that Ber-
trand Russell, whose paradox changed the course of mathemat-
ics, should have advocated world government in his later years.9
In such a case — assuming the global power issued its own cur-
rency — the axiom of choice would still need to be borrowed
from somewhere, and the declared integrity of its decision de-
fended. Mathematics and violence would still be weirdly linked.

8 Abstract slogans seem to be what Laclau has in mind for his empty signifier,
which comes to signify ever longer chains of equivalence until, as he says:
“at the limit it will be pure communitarian being independent of all concrete
manifestation.” Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s) (London: Verso, 2007), 42.
Yet he doesn’t seem to take into account the possibility that different parties
can imbue the empty signifier with contradictory meanings that are only
discovered later, when some connection to a concrete manifestation is at-
tempted. And you thought the stuff in the refrigerator was all shared.

9 Bertrand Russell, The Impact of Science on Society (New York: Simon and
Schuster, 1953).
Our options are still not entirely exhausted. If reducing the number of authenticators does nothing to resolve the paradox, what about reducing the appearance of the defining object — not abolishing money outright, communist-style, but settling for the demise of cash? It might seem that structuring money as a vast unit of account, as is presently the case with digital currencies, has already put an end to any pretense of an absolute personal effect. Yet our ethical reading of the situation allows us to see that this is not the case at all. The numbers on computer screens in two locations may amount to the same topological shapes, but the personal effects that the expressed numbers occupy never actually coincide. Meanwhile, the consequences of the contradiction continue unabated. Though the building, the star, the face do not necessarily appear anywhere in the transaction, their function has been condensed into the symbol for the currency, and remain as active there as ever. Anyone who doubts this need only consider a world where 1 = 1.28. That’s a possible outcome if one removes the symbols for the currencies, say the dollar sign and euro mark, from a published exchange rate. The authenticator who seems to have vanished is only concealed — and likely to be a little rusty in its aim when it resurfaces to quell the latest challenge to its authority.

In this respect, crypto-currencies, even though they’re independent of government authority, suffer from the same ethical shortcomings as any digital currency, insofar as they’re units of account subject to an exchange rate. Aside from any virtues it may hold as a monetary unit, Bitcoin, for example, was expressly designed to eliminate the need for trust. Yet the trader in Bitcoins, who presumably has a stake in the success of the currency, still has to trust that the architects of the system are playing fair.

For all their dizzying diversity, the various efforts to block Russell’s paradox share one assumption: that a solution is necessary. To which one says, “of course.” The mad king must be stopped, democracy must come, a change must come. Then again, it doesn’t follow that a stated imperative brings about change. On the contrary, I’ve presented at least two existing cases
where the unnecessary brings about the unforeseen, and where the good, though it can’t be willed, occurs nonetheless. More to the point, the entire enterprise of arrogating relations between objects runs counter to our original interest in decentering the human in practice. It should be acknowledged in this respect that the ordinary bearer of a coin relies on the issuer to take on the burden of the paradox for the sake of everyday convenience. (“When working out a sequence of choice functions on rational numbers, it may help to think of them as being generated by someone else.”) Logically then, we might want to shift our attention to the class of issuers — the many sovereign powers who, as self-described arbiters, are beholden in the last instance to no agreement with each other — and see what it would take to force the grounds of the absolute object outside of them.

First, let’s recapitulate. In considering Alexander’s directions, we found that, by forcing the grounds of a proposed action, we were able to establish a foundation for the actions of another entity (our strange companion) without expressly placing that foundation under our will. To move the head up and forward is an action that lies outside our ability either to do or not to do, because the command “head up and forward” a) does not submit to free volition and b) does occur to notable benefit under other conditions. As already remarked, it’s known that among mammals the head typically leads the action in the same way that it does among humans when the directions are successful. Thus, the directions identify an outcome that can be verified as a disjunct from the power to name. In fact, they align with the most widely accepted means of blocking the paradox of self-belonging: downward inheritance.

In ZFC set theory, sets belonging to themselves are prevented by the axiom of foundation, which states that for every set there is a disjunct element — a set that is “lower down” in a sequence. Because every non-empty set is larger than the empty set, a non-empty set can usually be saved from self-belonging by being founded on the empty set. In the case of human thought, foundation is more difficult to achieve, because even the thought of the empty set belongs to thought. That’s the crux of correlation-
ism. For grounds forcing, the idea is to follow the downward inheritance of a predicated set until predication is surpassed, yet emptiness is still not attained. The Alexandrian directions reduce the possibility of predicated actions to zero, and still the body moves. A blank indenture, for its part, is neither empty nor predicated — its matching contours already agree, independent of the word “agree.” This indirect choice of a number between 0 and 1, between nothing and a predicate, is evidence of an entity outside the declarative mind.

In the case of currency, then, we could envision a simple visual addition to cash that refers to no personal identity at all, and is therefore literally outside thought. Simply mint a banknote or coin according to its generally established design (just as we took actions as they were proposed), including all of its permanent references to sovereignty, and then add a mark — on the reverse, where commemorative images are usually found — that has no relation to any specific issuer. To really do it right, go further and choose a mark that can’t even be construed as having a relation to any specific issuer, past, present, or future. This mark, lacking verifiable reference or provenance, would be fatherless, an orphan in the land of obligations.\footnote{Those interested in an example are invited to turn to the appendix.}

Assuming an initial satisfaction of these stipulations, we could also begin to imagine a codified structure: Inscribe the mark on the reverse or “tails” side, as mentioned — but only on the lowest denomination of the currency. Placement at the bottom, where the common prevails, would serve both to acknowledge the least work necessary to produce it, and to highlight the least element in the set, which, technically, is included in any higher figure named.

What would we achieve by this? Could a blank reference on the tail side of a penny or the back of a yuan ever be anything more than decoration — a curiosity in the history of commemorative coins? Several aspects, I believe, would help to raise such a mark above triviality. As an effect produced by a state, its absence of reference could be defined strictly, as a matter of
law. The domain of necessity would consequently be quite clear, leaving no question as to whether it “really happened” or not. It would also be contained within a precisely defined physical object and therefore would be present whenever the legitimacy of the object came under scrutiny — that is, at the point where the finality of the arbiter is reproduced. Unlike a blank indenture, which is procedurally vague, it would follow an established pattern of inclusion and exclusion for the participants as it passed from hand to hand. These instances would then become a partially ordered set, in which successive parties to a transaction were presented with a command to recognize the numericity of objects as defined by the state (the object’s status as legal tender) and, simultaneously, a command that comes from nowhere and, by law, commands nothing.

A command from the state that commands nothing sounds fairly shocking, until you realize that it amounts to an acknowledgment of the general will, some paraphrase of which appears in the pages of many democratic constitutions. Our main interest here, however, lies not in political theory per se but in the connection that’s revealed between the general will and the wider practice of object orientation. A strictly anonymous emblem would, by its very dead-endedness, prompt the bearer of the coin on which it’s placed to evaluate it without recourse to any grounds for the axiom of choice — without halting at the issuer as its reason for being — thus opening an aperture in the declarative mind onto the objecthood of money. Pretty good for a lowly decoration!

And maybe too good. The peculiar, nameless, subjectless object that I’m proposing exudes an all-or-nothing quality, seeming at one moment to be a frivolous indulgence, at the next a recipe for insurrection. Drawing from our previous examples, we can see that this wavering quality stems from its potential for totalization. As laid out, my plan fails to explicitly rule out a set of all sets, because the entire effect exists at the pleasure of the issuer, thereby allowing the mark to be “the mark of issuer x” — which is very much like “my thought of the empty set” or, say, Dave Lindsay’s Account of Nothing. The issuer, for whom
knowledge of the mark is most direct, has no clear way of knowing when its own custody turns to jealousy, and the bearer has no particular reason not to be cynical about that ambiguity.

Fortunately, a mark chosen for its downward inheritance from *all* currency offers a provisional escape hatch out of this fix. Because my lowly decoration exists without any punitive consequences for its counterfeit, other issuers can adopt it without fear of infringement. In fact, any issuer whatsoever could reproduce it on its own legally binding design. A kind of copy- lefted seal, it could appear on different currencies, including alternative currencies, powerful currencies, weak currencies and currencies yet to be.

This radically public characteristic sets up an interesting dynamic. I’ve asserted that the concept of sovereignty supposes an inner sanctum with no relation to other issuers—in the case of monetization, this is the same as saying that the exchange rate between them is ungoverned.11 Treasuries are fundamentally other to each other, because each one claims to be the founding element of the set of all sets. We saw in totemism a tendency toward exogamy that prevented this claim of totalization. The offspring of two different clans did not produce a new species, but rather multiplied relations between species, as fox-sparrows aligned with bear-coyotes, and so on in widening spirals with varying traditions of eventual collapse and reset. The issuer of currency, on the other hand, has nowhere to go but to reproduce its exact expression of agency.

Adoption across currencies thus becomes the saving grace, because it breaks the presumption of totality. A mark of “no authority” placed on the effects of inviolable authority (bills or coins with an expressed denomination) would then act as a pressure on the smallest subset for cash *as cash*. The structure of grounds forcing now comes into view on a second level: If these different least elements were brought together in a strictly

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11 Continuing the comparison to Harman’s ontology: An exchange rate as a passive outcome of sovereign monetary policies suggests a lack of available vicars to bring issuers of currency into causal relation with each other.
procedural sense, the irresolvable relation between the various “smallest” rational numbers (penny, yuan, dinar, \( \ldots, n \)) would theoretically force some even smaller founding element, which cannot be named and yet represents some value greater than zero. The result: The participating issuers would no longer be foundational in their own eyes, but subsets of a larger, unnamable set.\(^{12}\)

How naive is it to imagine that an organization such as, say, the International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition would bring together coins from different nations, each bearing a “trans-sovereign” mark, there to be exposed in all their unprotected ontic glory? How audacious is it to think that cash will be even be minted in years to come? I have no idea. One cannot insist on the absence of authority, of course, and in this sense an open-ended adoption or evaluation cannot be controlled. It’s not necessary that it’s necessary. Moreover, cash lacks the advantage of the blank indenture, which, by the very act of ripping it in half, implicates two parties directly in some collaboration from the get-go.

On the other hand, the logic underpinning the proposal is at least consistent with our original assumption that the correlation has to be defeated from within (with the issuer taking over the post, sometimes occupied by the Cartesian ego, of the master predicate that ranges over a class), and if no one takes it up, one can nonetheless get a sense from it of the distance between present conditions and an objective ethics. Conversely, if it were attempted and ascribed to some ulterior agency — a plot to form a world government or the feeble attempts of a few misguided dreamers — the failure would merely signal a return to the way things already are.

We also have reason to believe that it would be good if such a mark were adopted on the penny and the yuan and the dinar, and indeed on any \( x \) currency whatsoever, including alternative currencies, since, as a mark that anyone can guarantee, it would introduce an element that exceeds any one authority. There

\(^{12}\) It bears recalling that Aristotle tutored the young Alexander the Great, who lived to put his own image on a coin.
would be no master predicate to found the forced set. The test therefore would be to maintain its rightful use by the next participant, whoever they might be, without regard to their status as friend or foe. If $\text{o00}$ entails that you show some object to be independent of your mind, then its efficacy in at least one instance would constitute a minimal demonstration, at the level of pure procedure, of identification with your enemy. That would be the practice elicited by the mark—the way of being of the objective ethics so posed.

In speculating on candidates for public things, currency offers a well-established and highly codified system with a very wide range of use. It also has a triumphant ring to it, in that it proceeds up to what appears to be the limit case of possible classes and then decenters $\text{that}$. As far as I can tell, it’s an open question as to whether there are any further levels of classes susceptible to grounds forcing—classes of classes of classes. The answer to that would seem to rely on the identification of some external monotype for a class larger than humans, which the present inquiry is unable to provide (except maybe somewhere in that teaser about macaque monkeys).

Then again, it may be that economic sovereignty will yet be exceeded as a domain of imminent necessity. After all, if totemism went the way of all things, so too could the central banks. In this respect, we can entertain variations on public things that show some potential, not only to surpass sovereignty, but also to yield more immediate development—and more egalitarian access.

*Sounding the Wilderness*

The early phase of the Occupy movement was notable for its absence of leadership or clear goals. Though its appearance can be traced through certain motivating parties, no one spoke for it, and it sought audience with no one in particular. It’s easy to see the parallel between this purposelessness and the general outlines of grounds forcing. To a street identified with the imminent necessity of the capitalism, the monotype command
“occupy” is applied. A human without portfolio, with no particular qualities of note, assents to this command, goes to a plaza on that street and, if she so desires, addresses the other humans there. The content of her speech is neither accepted nor rejected out of hand: The others present actually refuse to respond to it, and instead develop a procedure for relaying the speech in radiating waves, in a formalized method called the human microphone, such that successive occupants can also listen without linking it to a reply. As others take their turn at the podium, the very continuation of the procedure — Alexander’s means-whereby on a social level — converts the space from a metonym of unquestionable imperative to an ongoing operation, in which declarations of need are subjugated to the constant of agreeing to occupy the space as speakers. Membership is not restricted. Nothing is excluded but the principle of self-reference itself. “The people” ceases to be an idea and instead simply takes place, as a project focused on how to organize sound — how to organize the air.

At this point, though, we come up against an interesting antinomy. In the case of the Occupy movement, the grounds of a public thing, the bald fact of a place inhabited by people, can be forced by the indiscriminate acceptance of any petition to speak. With Alexander, on the other hand, we saw that every attempt to speak taxed the procedural mind, such that the successful initiation of a flat practice was most feasible when speech was reduced to a whispered vowel. Saying anything and saying nothing — how might these two practices be reconciled? Is there any intersection between them?

In the context of an individual, speech appears as alien to the implicit mind, because the sequence of utterances follows rules of inference that simply do not exist in its procedural instructions. These rules of inference, after classes are built up into predicates, are confined to temporal sequence. A noun will normally follow the word “of,” but there’s no specific noun that follows it every time. The declarative mind runs through an inventory of replacements until it chooses a noun on uncertain grounds. The procedural mind, meanwhile, has the motor se-
quences it has learned through repetition, and while these may serve to blunt the shock of speech to a degree, their applicability to semantics is entirely a matter of rote. How, then, are we to form utterances at all without overpowering instinct?

One obvious way is to relax the rules of inference. Take no thought for what you shall say. This option is consistent with our example of the human microphone. Within the space of its practice, there are no mandatory talking points for any given speaker and therefore no possibility of straying off-topic. *Pace* Badiou, there are only bodies and language — and publicly demonstrating as much forces a truth.

Our only problem here is that we underestimate how persistent the rules of inference really are. To echo our original complaint about OOO (as its canonical form is generally advanced), there is no clear evidence of when we’re bending the rules and when we are not. Maybe it isn’t explicit enough that the human microphone procedure exceeds some authority. The possibility of a set that does not belong to itself seems to persist, since one of the speakers could actually have the goal of preventing others from speaking — and a filibustering speaker must be admitted along with the others. In fact, in the strictest sense, every speaker does this, insofar as others are kept waiting for their turn.13

With the directions, then, we find it difficult to maintain both flatness and word order, while with the human microphone, we meet an obstacle in maintaining both equanimity and speaker order. Interestingly enough, when the importance of word order is weakened far enough, the importance of speaker order diminishes as well. There is a point at which the rules of inference become so weak that an utterance by another speaker no longer counts as an interruption. Utterance dissolves into babble, which, to the extent that it’s intended as babble, allows for simultaneous utterances.

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As a matter of formal possibility, then, both the directions and the human microphone could be extended to force the grounds of vocal expression. The idea might not be as ludicrous as it seems at first blush. In the introduction to this inquiry, I compared the practice of object orientation to the ephemeral nature of music, and as it turns out, one outcome of this practice could actually be music.

But wait—doesn’t music follow rules of inference as well? Well, yes and no. It’s true that most cultures have expectations of rhythmic, harmonic, and tonal iteration. (“That’s not the real Japanese court style,” etc.) It’s also the case that music, although apparently not about anything at all, is vigorously hijacked to every conceivable end. Rousseau was probably not the first to notice the relation between music and reference when he wrote about melodies that seemed to speak only to their presumed audience.14 Organized sound is at once both un-possessable and fervently claimed.

Yet there are also traditions in which such claims are actively challenged. The free music movement of the mid-20th century made it its mission to produce sound unencumbered by rules of inference. As of this writing, one can find invitations online to join “ecstatic singing” events—group vocalizations expressly devoid of pre-determined plan.15 And in any event, one wants to include the vast underworld of impromptu melodic or rhythmic fragments created by people just going about their daily business. That’s a form of radiance too. Humans are polymorphously musical.

Our nth task, then, could be to create a public thing that maximizes the possible number of musical participants, while reducing the recourse to reference as far as can be—Rousseau’s general assembly expanded indefinitely, with syllabic order and speaker order dissolved.

Of course, sound isn’t the same kind of object as currency or food, and as objects change, so do the challenges. It would do no good, for example, to look for an utterance that remains separate from a recognizable sequence of sounds. There is no absolute sound in this sense. What we’re looking for instead is the impulse to vocalize that precedes the machinery of reference, precedes even the choice between speaking and singing, and then a forum that captures that impulse from a maximum number of “vocalists.” Let’s give this imagined activity the name “khōra calling,” with a nod to Plato’s term for the formless substrate that pervades the universe, and, of course, the clear suggestion of a chorus.

What would khōra calling entail? How would it take place? I’d be a fool to claim to know the innovations tomorrow will bring, but the technology of today suggests a provisional plan. First, assume an online platform that allows for simultaneous vocal input and output, which users can access anonymously from any device — basically, an online game platform designed to support group vocalization. Then build into this platform an inverted speech recognition program. Instead of identifying known words and ruling them in, the program would recognize them and rule them out, giving priority to vocal sounds with the least linguistic content. Follow that up with a music recognition program, and invert that too, so as to rule out known musical content as well. These inverted recognition protocols would then drive read-outs of the various singing sessions in progress, with the least referential results appearing at the top of a list on the participant’s screens, leaving the participants to hum or jabber or shout as they please.

While one can imagine new referential structures arising within these improvised choruses — codes within the khōra — the system would always be vulnerable to the entry of any vocalization whatsoever. Conversely, if participants decided in favor of lots of structure — pronounced rhythms and identifiable words — that too would be their prerogative. The favorites on the list would only be relatively free of reference, while those
more heavily laden with reference would simply be rotated out of the listings.

No doubt the basic program would need to be tinkered with to meet nuts-and-bolts concerns. How many languages can a recognition program actually filter out? How many vocalists can participate in a single session before it turns to mush? Would it be better to design the audio input so that only a hum comes through? Should there be an option to record? What about video capability?

Khōra calling would also be limited by outside forces. For one thing, the communication lines themselves would not be public. As with a room in which kinesthetics are taught, or a private park in which democracy is exercised, it would survive at the pleasure of an owner somewhere behind the scenes. The possibility would also exist that hackers might try to infiltrate other devices under cover of anonymity. Then, too, people without the right technology might be unable to participate, and people without the best technology could be disadvantaged.

Yet within these constraints, there are positive signs. Khōra calling would “happen” on an object one could reliably approach, thereby allowing it to be brought to zero in a methodical way. It would be non-reproducible at any point where reproduction was sought as a means to prop up finality. Moreover, its anonymity would render membership in the pool free for the seeker of social equality and the student of the self and the patriot, without any conflict between them. Interestingly, the procedure would be largely embedded. Even the prompt to inhibit reference would not appear, as it did with the anonymous mark on currencies. Rather, it would take the form of an automated gatekeeper, letting pass only those impulses that run diagonal across the soundscape of the known.

And that lets the swerve back into the game. To the degree that the novelty of these outcries could be reproduced, their es-

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16 The maximally public scenario — a network of phone users on conference calls — would have to conquer latency, the mouth-to-ear delay of a sound, which varies depending on the medium through which it travels.
cape from our mouths would herald a practice that goes beyond ethics to include aesthetics, a carpentry of the air that belongs to no one, an effect without provenance: the songs of our strange companions.