

Generative Obstruction

Toward a Minimal Theory of Conflict in Generative Relational Being

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Abstract

Epicurus located happiness in the absence of two disturbances: pain of the body and disturbance of the soul. The distinction is structural before it is hedonic, separating what impedes a system from within from what impedes it in its coupling with others, and this paper retains the structure while dropping the hedonic content, asking what obstructs generation in place of what disturbs tranquility. Existing theories of conflict begin from incompatible primitives: power, interests, values, identity, institutions. Each explains real phenomena, and each imports an ontological starting point the others do not share. This paper proposes a single primitive explanatory object, *generative obstruction*, defined as any interaction that diminishes the ongoing generative capacity of a constrained generative system, and treats conflict as the manifestation of such obstruction in place of a primitive. Power, resource competition, misinterpretation, unmet demand, and symbolic commitment then appear as mechanisms producing a common phenomenon, in place of competing definitions of conflict. The paper's substantive result concerns the reference trajectories that attributions of obstruction require: since no ontologically privileged trajectory is available to a relationally constituted subject, such trajectories are admissible as working models held for coordination, and an argument is given that a model treated as accurate degrades the channel by which it would be corrected, so that its *rigidity* bears on obstruction where its content does not. A constructed case exhibits the argument. The framework's limits are stated at length: obstruction is defined by a partial order that leaves an important class of cases unclassified, and attributions of obstruction are licensed from within a relation while remaining unlicensed from outside it, which restricts the account more severely than its exposition might suggest.

Keywords: generative obstruction; conflict; generative relational being; reference trajectory; revisability; symbolic closure.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a foundational paper, offered in place of a theory of conflict resolution. It proposes one primitive explanatory object and works out what follows from admitting only that object; the discipline it attempts is subtractive, and much of its labour consists in declining concepts that a theory of conflict might be expected to carry, among them justice, value, fairness, and alienation. Its central result is a claim about the rigidity of reference models, argued from the framework's own resources and exhibited on a constructed case in place of an empirical one. Several of its commitments are left as open questions where the resources to settle them were unavailable, and these are collected in the final two sections in place of being distributed as qualifications. Should the primitive be shown to do no work that existing primitives do not already do, the paper loses its ground. Objection, correction, and counter-evidence are welcome at huangwanhong@serendip.ngo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Epicurus defines happiness negatively, and by two terms. It consists in *aponia*, the absence of pain in the body, and *ataraxia*, the absence of disturbance in the soul. The definition is ordinarily read as hedonic doctrine and assessed as such: whether the absence of disturbance is a plausible account of the good life, whether the tranquil life is the choiceworthy one. Read that way it belongs to the history of ethics and bears little on the theory of conflict.

There is another way to read it. Set aside the hedonic content and attend only to the structure, and what the definition supplies is a partition of impediment into two loci. Bodily pain impedes a system in the operation of its own processes; it is an obstruction internal to the system, requiring no second party. Disturbance of the soul, in the Epicurean treatment, arises characteristically from what stands between a person and others or between a person and the order of things: from fear of the gods, fear of death, the demands of political entanglement, the disturbances that attend living among others whose purposes are not one's own. It is an obstruction that presupposes a coupling. What Epicurus thereby distinguishes is two places where trouble occurs, in preference to two intensities of one trouble: within the system and in the system's relation to what it is coupled with.

This paper takes the partition and discards the rest. Three things go. The hedonic content goes, since nothing here suggests that the absence of disturbance is the human good, and the argument is indifferent to whether it is. The terminus goes: Epicurean happiness is a state to be arrived at and maintained, whereas what follows concerns processes that continue in place of states that settle. And the negative definition goes as a definition, though it is retained as a heuristic, since the concern below falls on what obstruction is and how it propagates, a positive question about a mechanism, leaving aside the negative question about a condition. What survives the subtraction is the two-locus structure, and it survives in transposed form. Where Epicurus asks what disturbs tranquility, this paper asks what obstructs generation; and where he distinguishes disturbance of the body from disturbance of the soul, this paper will distinguish obstruction of a system's own generative dynamics from obstruction of its capacity to develop those dynamics under relational coupling.

The transposition earns its place, and it is worth being explicit about what it buys. A theory that introduced an internal and relational distinction on its own authority would be introducing a second primitive, and would owe an argument for the partition. Taking the distinction from a place where it was drawn for other reasons entirely, and drawn before there was any theory of generation to serve, is some evidence that the seam lies in the phenomena in preference to the theory. The partition is inherited; only the terms in which it is drawn are new.

Conflict is among the best-theorized objects in the social sciences, and the difficulty lies in the form the explanations take, leaving scarcity aside. Realism begins from power and reads conflict as what follows from its distribution. Liberal institutionalism begins from institutions

and reads conflict as what their absence or weakness permits. Materialist accounts begin from the relations of production; constructivist accounts from identity and its formation; normative accounts from disagreement about value. Each of these explains real cases, and explains some of them better than its rivals do. What they do not share is a common object. Each begins from a different primitive, and a primitive differs from a variable: it is what the theory declines to explain in order to explain everything else. When theories differ in their primitives they do not disagree in the ordinary sense, since they are not making incompatible claims about the same object. They are constituting different objects.

The consequence is that the accumulated body of conflict theory does not accumulate. Findings within a tradition compound; findings across traditions are difficult even to place beside one another, because the entity whose behaviour is being explained is differently constituted in each. A finding about power asymmetry and a finding about identity formation may both be sound and still fail to bear on each other, for want of a common object to which both could be referred, leaving data aside.

This suggests a question that is prior to the contest among the traditions and does not require adjudicating it. Suppose power, institutions, identity, and value amount to competing accounts of how conflict is produced, in place of competing answers to the question of what conflict is. Then they would not be rivals at all. They would be mechanisms, and mechanisms can coexist without embarrassment: several may operate at once, they may compose, one may dominate in one case and another in another. What such a reading requires is a specification of the phenomenon they severally produce, an object more primitive than any of them, in terms of which each can be described as a route to a common outcome. Supplying such an object is the work this paper attempts.

The analogy from medicine is instructive and worth stating plainly, since it fixes the kind of move being made. Fever escapes classification by pathogen. It is characterized physiologically, as a phenomenon, and viruses, bacteria, autoimmune processes, and malignancies are then understood as distinct mechanisms capable of producing it. That architecture achieves something beyond a compromise among competing theories of fever; it is what made the competing theories into complementary ones. The proposal here is architecturally the same, with conflict in the place of fever and generative obstruction in the place of the physiological characterization.

The primitive proposed is *generative obstruction*: any interaction that diminishes the ongoing generative capacity of a constrained generative system. The terms are developed in §3 and §4; what matters at the outset is the shape of the commitment.

Two features of that shape distinguish it from the primitives it would replace. The first is its dynamical character. Power distribution, institutional density, and identity configuration are all properties a situation has at a time, and a theory built on them evaluates situations at times. Generative capacity is a property of a process, namely what a system can go on generating,

and it cannot be read off an instantaneous configuration. Obstruction is accordingly path-dependent: an interaction that diminishes capacity now may enlarge it later, and the same distribution of any static quantity may or may not be obstructing depending on the trajectory it belongs to. This follows as a consequence of the primitive, requiring no additional assumption, and §4 derives it as such.

The second is that it is relational without being reducible to relations between fixed parties. The systems whose generativity is at issue are constituted within the couplings in which they stand; they do not enter relations already formed. This commitment, longstanding in the framework of Generative Relational Being, is what makes the paper's central difficulty acute. Any attribution of obstruction requires a reference, since to say that *A* obstructed *B* is to say that something *B* would otherwise have generated was foreclosed, and a relationally constituted subject has no privileged baseline to serve as that reference. The trajectory the subject would have followed in isolation is unavailable as a reference, since the isolation it presupposes was never the subject's condition. The difficulty is taken up directly in §7, and the paper's substantive result is what emerges from it: reference trajectories are admissible as working models in place of facts, and the obstruction-relevant variable is whether a model remains open to revision by the party it models, leaving aside how far it departs from what it models. The answer is partial. It licenses models held by parties to a relation and fails to license models held by observers outside one, which restricts the framework's reach considerably and is stated as such in §9.

A theory that explains everything within its domain has usually failed to specify a domain. This paper states its scope in preference to maximizing it, and two limitations are entered at the outset because they shape what follows. The first concerns mechanisms: no exhaustive taxonomy of the mechanisms producing obstruction is offered or attempted. Several are discussed in §5; others certainly exist; the framework's claim is about the phenomenon they produce, not about the completeness of any list of producers. The second concerns the reach of the primitive itself. Not every conflict is a manifestation of generative obstruction. Two parties may want incompatible things while neither diminishes the other's generative capacity, and the resulting conflict is real, is sometimes severe, and lies outside what this framework explains. In place of absorbing such cases by stipulation, which remains available in every instance and secures nothing, §5 supplies a criterion for telling whether a given conflict falls within the framework's reach. A theory that says where it does not apply is stronger than one that cannot be shown not to apply.

Normative questions are declined entirely. Justice, fairness, value, ethics, and happiness require a further layer and are not treated here. §9 says why, and notes one consequence of the paper's own result: that once reference trajectories are understood as non-ontological, deviation from them loses whatever normative weight it appeared to carry, and unrevisability is left doing the work.

The remainder proceeds as follows. §2 surveys the existing explanatory primitives and states the reduction of each to a mechanism. §3 sets out constrained generative dynamics: generativity as process, constraint, and generative capacity. §4 defines generative obstruction, partitions it by locus following the reading of Epicurus above, and derives its modal properties, including path-dependence. §5 treats conflict as the manifestation of obstruction, arrays the mechanisms without privilege among them, and gives the scope criterion by way of the case of unmet demand. §6 isolates the one property that earns symbolic mechanisms a separate treatment, that they make obstruction self-reproducing. §7 takes up the problem of the reference trajectory, gives the engineering reading, and states the rigidity claim. §8 demonstrates that claim on a constructed case in which content and disagreement are held fixed and only revisability varies. §9 states what the paper does not attempt, and §10 what it leaves open.

2 THE REDUCTION OF EXISTING PRIMITIVES TO MECHANISMS

The traditions surveyed here each explain a class of cases and do so well. The aim of this section is to ask what follows from reading each as an account of production, where the tradition itself offers an account of constitution. The reduction proposed takes a uniform form: where a tradition holds that conflict *is* a certain configuration, the reading offered here holds that the configuration is one route by which generative capacity comes to be diminished.

Power is the most developed case and the most instructive. The realist account locates conflict in the distribution of capability: parties in an anarchic setting attend to relative position, and conflict follows from the incentives that position creates. The account predicts a great deal. What it leaves unstated is why a distribution should matter at all, and the answer available when the question is pressed is telling. An adverse distribution matters because of what the stronger party can then do to the weaker, which is to say, because of the range of futures it can foreclose. The appeal is already to something beyond distribution. Distribution serves as the mechanism; foreclosure of possible futures is what the mechanism produces. This also explains a known weakness. A capability differential between parties whose developments intersect little forecloses correspondingly little, and such cases are among those realism handles worst.

Interests and resource competition admit the same reading. Two parties requiring the same finite resource conflict, on the standard account, because the resource resists division. Scarcity alone leaves the matter open. What makes a resource contest conflictual is that one party's securing the resource removes something the other required in order to continue developing, and the contest grows less conflictual in proportion as substitutes exist, as timescales permit sequential access, or as the resource proves dispensable to either party's continuation. Resource competition thus operates as a mechanism whose obstructive force varies with facts about generative dependence, and those facts concern the parties in place of the resource.

Institutions enter the same way with the sign reversed. The institutionalist observes that conflict is suppressed where institutions are dense and erupts where they are thin, explaining this by information, commitment, and the shadow of the future. Described in the vocabulary proposed here, institutions stabilize the conditions under which parties can go on developing in each other's presence: they make foreclosure less likely and less permanent. Their absence leaves obstruction ungoverned. This accounts for the imperfection of institutional density as a predictor of peace, since an institution that stabilizes one party's development at the cost of another's suppresses conflict only partially, and may relocate it. The literature's persistent difficulty with unequal institutional orders is a symptom of measuring density in place of what density is supposed to secure.

Identity is the case where the reduction is least obvious and most worth making. The constructivist holds that parties act on the basis of who they take themselves and others to be, and that conflict follows from identities constituted in mutual opposition. Read as a mechanism, identity fixes what a party takes its own continuation to require and what it takes another party's continuation to threaten. Identities constituted in opposition are those under which each party's development is understood to require the other's containment. Whether such an understanding is accurate remains a separate question, and its capacity to remain fully operative while inaccurate gives a first indication of something §6 treats at length: mechanisms that fix interpretations stand in a distinctive relation to the persistence of obstruction.

Value disagreement completes the survey. Parties committed to incompatible normative orders are held to conflict in virtue of the incompatibility. Normative disagreement is common and mostly inert. Two parties may hold irreconcilable views about the good and leave each other's development untouched, provided neither requires the other's conversion or submission as a condition of its own continuation. Value disagreement becomes conflict once joined to such a requirement, and the requirement carries the weight. This explains why the difference between deep pluralism and sectarian conflict fails to track the depth of the disagreement.

A common structure runs through the five cases. Each tradition names something real; in each, what renders the named thing conflictual is a further fact about the foreclosure of one party's continuation by another. The traditions differ in what they name and agree, tacitly, on what makes it matter. That tacit agreement is what the present proposal makes explicit.

Claim 1. *Power, resource competition, institutional configuration, identity, and value disagreement admit a uniform reading as mechanisms producing a common phenomenon. In each case, what renders the named configuration conflictual is a further fact about the foreclosure of a party's ongoing development, and this further fact is shared across all five.*

Two consequences follow. The traditions become complementary, since mechanisms compose where definitions exclude one another. And a burden is incurred: the common phenomenon requires specification in terms that presuppose none of the mechanisms. Should generative

obstruction prove definable only by appeal to power, or to interests, or to identity, the reduction is circular and the exercise yields little. Discharging that burden is the work of the two sections that follow, which is why they remain silent about conflict.

3 THE APPARATUS: GENERATIVITY, CONSTRAINT, AND CAPACITY

This section states the minimal apparatus, concerning systems and their development. It introduces no notion of conflict, obstruction, or relation between parties, all of which enter in §4. The order is required by the burden just incurred, which demands that the primitive be specifiable independently of the mechanisms it unifies.

Generativity comes first. A system is generative in the sense used here if it produces structure absent from it before, where that structure becomes the basis for what it produces next. The emphasis falls on the second clause. Change alone leaves generativity undetermined: a system that oscillates traverses novel states while its capacity to produce remains fixed, and a system perturbed from equilibrium and returning to it ends where it began. What distinguishes generation is that its products enter the conditions of subsequent production, so that the system's own history constrains and enables what it can go on to make. A research programme generates in this sense, since results become the instruments and the questions of later results. A developing organism does, a language does, an institution does. The common feature lies in the incorporation of what has been produced into the productive capacity itself.

One qualification belongs here, since the condition just stated admits a reading stronger than the one intended. Incorporation covers a range of cases. At one end sits strict accumulation, where products are retained and compound; at the other sits mere conditioning, where what was produced shapes what can follow while leaving no persistent trace of itself. A conversation generates in the second sense: what has been said conditions what can be said next, and little of it is retained. Both fall within the scope of the term, and the condition requires only that production be historically conditioned by production, allowing accumulation as one case among several. The weaker reading is the operative one throughout, and §4 relies on nothing stronger.

Generativity is accordingly a property of processes and holds of states only derivatively. A state admits description independent of how it was reached; a generative capacity resists such description, since what a system can produce next depends on what it has already produced and on the manner of the producing. Two systems occupying identical states may differ considerably in generative capacity, having arrived by different routes and thereby accumulated different instruments, foreclosed different options, and acquired different dependencies. This point carries considerable weight later, and it is worth marking as a feature of generation itself, stated here in advance of any claim about conflict.

Constraint enters next. Generative processes of the kind at issue operate under conditions

determining which productions are available to them, and these conditions divide into several kinds. They are material, in that resources and energy are finite; structural, in that what has already been produced forecloses some paths as it opens others; temporal, in that production takes time and certain sequences resist compression; and relational, in that a system coupled to others develops under conditions those others partly set. Constraint operates as the condition of generation. An unconstrained process is formless, since constraint is what makes some productions available in preference to others and thereby gives the process a direction. The term *constrained generative system* accordingly marks no special case. It marks the general one.

Generative capacity is the third and final term: what a system can go on generating from where it now stands, given its history and its constraints. Three features of the notion require comment, each bearing weight later.

Capacity is forward-looking and therefore inferred in place of observed. What is observed is what a system has produced; what capacity concerns is what it could produce, and the inference between them is defeasible. A system may have produced little while retaining large capacity, and may have produced much while exhausting the conditions that made the production possible. This gap between record and capacity is the reason the notion is needed, since a theory attending only to what had been produced would lack the means to distinguish a system that had been prevented from one that had yet to act.

Capacity resists representation as a scalar. It approximates a space of available continuations, and it changes in ways a single number captures poorly. It contracts, when continuations formerly available cease to be. It expands, when new instruments or couplings open continuations that did not exist. And it deforms without contracting or expanding in extent, when the available continuations are exchanged for others of comparable range and different character. The third possibility is easily overlooked and matters in §4, since a system whose capacity has been redirected wholesale may register no loss on any measure of extent while having been changed in the respect that counts.

Capacity is relationally conditioned, and typically to a considerable degree. A system's available continuations depend on the couplings it stands in: what a research programme can generate depends on its collaborators and readers, what a state can generate depends on its neighbours, what a person can generate depends on those they live among. This states a condition of capacity and stops short of any claim about obstruction, since a coupling may enlarge capacity as readily as reduce it, and §4 requires the enlarging case as much as the reducing one.

Three terms are now in place: generativity, constraint, and generative capacity. None makes reference to power, interest, institution, identity, or value. None makes reference to conflict, and none yet involves more than one system at a time. The burden incurred at the close of §2 is discharged to this extent, that the vocabulary in which obstruction will be defined stands independent of the mechanisms obstruction is meant to unify.

4 GENERATIVE OBSTRUCTION: DEFINITION, LOCI, AND MODAL PROPERTIES

The apparatus of §3 concerned single systems. Obstruction requires two, and it is introduced here in three steps: the definition, the partition by locus inherited from the reading of Epicurus in §1, and the modal properties that follow from the definition together with the account of capacity already given.

4.1 *The Ordering on Continuation Spaces*

Section 3 held that generative capacity resists representation as a scalar and approximates a space of available continuations. A definition of obstruction as diminution of capacity accordingly requires an account of what diminution amounts to on such a space, and the account must be given before the definition is stated.

The resource available is a partial order. Where the continuations available to a system under one condition are among those available under another, capacity has diminished in a sense requiring no further apparatus: write $G' \preceq G$ where the continuations in G' are contained in those of G . Contraction, as described in §3, is the case where this holds strictly, and expansion the converse.

The order is partial in the strict sense, and the incomparable cases are those §3 named deformation: a continuation space exchanged for another of comparable extent and different character stands in no containment relation to its predecessor. Neither $G' \preceq G$ nor $G \preceq G'$ holds, and the definition below therefore fails to classify such cases.

This is a limitation of the present formulation and is entered as such. Two responses are available and neither is adopted here. A measure on continuation spaces would order the incomparable cases by extent, at the cost of treating spaces of equal extent as equivalent, which is precisely what the deformation mode was introduced to deny. An evaluative ordering would rank continuations by their worth, which requires the normative apparatus §9 declines. The framework as it stands orders the comparable cases and registers the incomparable ones as a distinct phenomenon requiring treatment it does not supply.

4.2 *The Definition and Its Reference Problem*

Definition 1. *An interaction constitutes a generative obstruction of a system when the continuations available to that system under the interaction are properly contained in those available otherwise: $G' \prec G$.*

Four features of the definition deserve comment before it is put to work.

Its scope is the comparable cases. Deformation of a continuation space, where no containment relation holds, falls outside Definition 1 and is registered in §4.4 as a distinct mode. This

costs the framework the cases the tradition treats under the heading of alienation, which §9 takes up, and the cost is preferred to an ordering the framework cannot support.

It is comparative in form. To say that continuations have been foreclosed is to compare those available under the interaction with those available otherwise, and the comparison presupposes a specification of the otherwise. This is the definition's principal difficulty. Section 7 takes it up and, as will be seen there, supplies a partial answer in place of a complete one. The problem is stated here and left standing, since the intervening sections require the definition in its provisional form.

It concerns capacity in place of production. A system prevented from producing what it was about to produce has been obstructed; a system that produces nothing while its capacity stands intact has not. The distinction follows from the account of capacity in §3 and matters for cases where the two come apart. Rest, deliberate abstention, and the fallow period of a research programme are cases where production falls while capacity holds or grows. Treating these as obstruction would be an error, and the definition avoids it by attaching to capacity.

It is silent about intention. An interaction obstructs when it diminishes capacity, whatever the intentions behind it. A party may obstruct another while intending assistance, and may intend obstruction while producing none. This silence is deliberate and has a cost, since it removes from the theory's reach a distinction that moral assessment requires. The cost is accepted here as the price of keeping the primitive mechanical, and §9 returns to what it forecloses.

4.3 *The Two Loci*

The partition inherited in §1 divides obstruction by its place of operation. Transposed into the vocabulary of §3, the two loci are these.

Internal obstruction operates on a system's own generative dynamics. Its instances include the depletion of the material conditions of production, the disorganization of the system's informational processes, and the exhaustion of the capacity to sustain the process at all. What characterizes the locus is that the diminution requires no second system for its description. A system suffering internal obstruction has been impaired in the operation of its own processes, and the impairment would be describable were the system considered alone.

Relational obstruction operates on a system's capacity to develop its dynamics under coupling. Its instances include lock-in, where a coupling fixes a system's development along a path it can no longer leave; the imposition of a rigid reference model, treated at length in §7; and institutional configuration that stabilizes one party's development at another's expense. What characterizes the locus is that the diminution requires the coupling for its description. A system suffering relational obstruction retains its own processes in working order and finds the conditions of their development set by another.

Two remarks about the partition. The first concerns its independence from the mecha-

nism/phenomenon distinction of §2. Locus concerns where obstruction operates; mechanism concerns what produces it. A single mechanism may produce obstruction at either locus: a resource contest that starves a party produces internal obstruction, and the same contest resolved by an agreement that fixes one party's development produces relational obstruction. The two distinctions cut across each other and neither reduces to the other.

The second concerns the traffic between the loci, which runs in both directions and which the partition should be read to permit. Sustained relational obstruction produces internal obstruction, as a system whose development has been fixed by another loses, over time, the internal resources that development sustained. Internal obstruction shapes the couplings a system can enter, and a depleted system is more readily subjected to relational obstruction than a flourishing one. The partition marks two places where obstruction operates, leaving the passage between them open. Nothing here requires that a given episode be assigned exclusively to one locus.

The distribution of the paper's attention between the loci is uneven, and the reason is worth stating. Internal obstruction is the better-studied of the two and is treated in several mature literatures under other names. The relational locus is where this framework has something to add, and it is where the paper's substantive result falls. The remaining sections concern it almost exclusively.

4.4 *Modal Properties*

The properties collected here follow from Definition 1 together with the account of capacity in §3. They are stated as properties of the primitive, and they are the resources on which the later sections draw.

Extent. Obstruction may be local, closing a portion of a system's available continuations while leaving the remainder intact, or global, diminishing capacity across the range. The distinction admits degrees and turns on how much of the continuation space the diminution reaches.

Duration. Obstruction may be temporary, with capacity restored as the interaction lapses, or persistent, with capacity remaining diminished after the interaction has ceased. Persistence requires explanation, since an interaction that has ceased explains nothing about what follows it. The explanation is the concern of §6.

Reversibility. Obstruction may be reversible, where the foreclosed continuations remain recoverable, or irreversible, where their foreclosure has entered the conditions of subsequent production and cannot be undone by removing the interaction. Reversibility and duration are distinct: an obstruction may persist while remaining reversible in principle, and may be brief while foreclosing something permanently.

Character, and the limit of the definition here. A system's continuation space may be deformed, its continuations exchanged for others of comparable extent and different character. Definition

1 does not reach these cases, since the partial order supplies no relation between the spaces, and this section registers them as a phenomenon standing outside the primitive in place of a mode within it.

The registration is worth making for two reasons. Such cases occur, and a framework silent about them would be silent about a substantial class of what its subject matter contains. And they are where the concerns the tradition treats under the heading of alienation would fall, so that the framework's inability to reach them locates a gap precisely in place of leaving it diffuse. What can be said of such cases within the present resources is that a change of character has occurred, which requires no account of what the space ought to have contained. What cannot be said is whether the change constitutes obstruction, and §9 enters this as an open question.

Path-dependence. This property does the most work later, and it follows from the definition together with §3 in a way worth setting out step by step.

Definition 1 makes obstruction a diminution of generative capacity. Section 3 established that generative capacity depends on a system's history, since what a system can produce next depends on what it has already produced and on the manner of the producing. Combining the two: whether a given interaction diminishes capacity depends on the history in which the interaction falls. The same interaction, occurring at two points in a system's history, diminishes capacity at one and enlarges it at the other, since the continuations it closes and opens are determined by what the system has already produced. A constraint imposed on a system that has yet to develop the instruments the constraint presupposes forecloses much; the same constraint imposed after those instruments exist forecloses little and may open a path that was unavailable before.

Two consequences follow, and both bear on how obstruction can be assessed.

The first concerns instantaneous assessment. Whether an interaction is obstructive resists being read from a description of the situation at the moment of the interaction, since the assessment draws on the history such a description omits. Two situations identical in their instantaneous descriptions may differ in whether a given interaction obstructs, the difference lying in their histories. This is what separates the present primitive from primitives of the static kind. Power distribution, institutional density, and identity configuration are properties a description at a time supplies; whether capacity has been diminished stands outside what such a description reaches.

The second concerns the assessment of intervals. Since obstruction at one moment may enlarge capacity later, and enlargement at one moment may foreclose later, an assessment restricted to a single moment risks misreading the interval it falls in. The unit of assessment is accordingly the trajectory, and what is assessed is the course of obstruction across it. Nothing in this requires that trajectories be compared to some preferred trajectory, and §7 gives reasons for doubting that such a comparison is available. What is available is the course of a system's capacity across the interval, and that is what the assessment concerns.

Claim 2. *Generative obstruction is path-dependent, and its path-dependence follows from the definition together with the historical conditioning of generative capacity, requiring no further assumption. Whether an interaction diminishes capacity depends on the history in which it falls; the unit of assessment is accordingly the trajectory in place of the moment.*

The promise entered in §1 is discharged to this extent. Path-dependence was there described as a consequence of the primitive in place of an addition to it, and the derivation above is the consequence in question. What the derivation requires from §3 is the weak reading of historical conditioning defended there, that production be conditioned by production; the strong reading, requiring accumulation, is unnecessary.

5 CONFLICT AS THE MANIFESTATION OF OBSTRUCTION, AND THE LIMITS OF THAT READING

The primitive is now specified, and the reduction proposed in §2 can be stated in the vocabulary of §4. This section does three things: it states the relation between obstruction and conflict, it arrays the mechanisms without privilege among them, and it supplies the criterion by which a given conflict is assigned to the framework's reach or placed outside it. The third is the section's principal work.

5.1 *The Relation Between Obstruction and Conflict*

Conflict enters the framework as a derived phenomenon. The relation may be stated as follows.

Definition 2. *Two systems stand in mutual generative obstruction when each diminishes the ongoing generative capacity of the other. Conflict, on the reading proposed here, is the manifestation of generative obstruction that has become relationally significant between the parties to it.*

Two clauses in the definition require comment, and the second carries a difficulty.

Mutuality is one condition among the possible ones, and its status should be marked. Obstruction runs in one direction readily: a party may diminish another's capacity while its own capacity stands unaffected, and the asymmetric case is common. What the asymmetric case yields is domination in place of conflict, and the difference is worth preserving. A conflict has two parties acting upon each other; a domination has one party acting and another undergoing. The framework registers both and describes them differently, which is a point in its favour, since theories built on power distribution have a known difficulty distinguishing the two.

Relational significance is the second clause, and it is doing more work than its brevity suggests. Not every mutual diminution of capacity manifests as conflict. Two parties may each slightly reduce the other's continuations, register the reduction little, and continue.

One candidate threshold is available within the framework's resources and is offered provisionally. Obstruction has become relationally significant where it has entered the parties' working models of each other: where each party's model of the other includes the obstruction as a term, and each party's conduct is conditioned by that term. This makes the threshold a fact about the models in place of a fact about the intensity of the obstruction, which has the advantage of connecting Definition 2 to the apparatus §7 develops, and the disadvantage of resting on the same working models whose standing that section finds limited.

The candidate is offered without confidence. It may prove too permissive, since models absorb a great deal that organizes no relation, and the threshold would then admit conflicts that are none. What can be said in mitigation is that the vagueness attaches to the manifestation in place of the primitive: whether continuations have been foreclosed admits sharper treatment than whether the foreclosure has become significant, and the sharper question is the one the framework is built on. Supplying a defensible threshold is entered in §10.

5.2 *The Mechanisms, Without Privilege*

The mechanisms surveyed in §2 now take their place as routes to obstruction. Resource competition produces obstruction when one party's securing of a resource removes a condition of the other's continuation. Power asymmetry produces it when capability differential is converted into foreclosure. Institutional configuration produces it when arrangements stabilize one party's development at another's expense, and suppresses it when they stabilize the conditions of development for both. Misinterpretation produces it when a party acts on a construal of the other that leads it to foreclose what it took to be already closed. Unmet demand produces it under conditions the following subsection specifies. Symbolic and normative commitment produces it when the commitment requires the other's conversion or containment as a condition of the committed party's own continuation.

Two observations about this list. The mechanisms compose: several may operate at once, and the obstruction they jointly produce may exceed what each produces alone. And the list is open. Others exist, and the framework's claim concerns the phenomenon these produce, leaving the enumeration incomplete by design. A theory of mechanisms would require the enumeration; a theory of the phenomenon they produce does not.

5.3 *The Scope Criterion, Tested on Unmet Demand*

The most pressing objection to a framework of this kind is that conflicts arise which involve no obstruction, and the objection is correct. The case of unmet demand states it sharply, and working through that case yields the criterion this subsection supplies.

Consider two parties, where one wants something the other declines to provide. The frustration is real and the conflict that follows is real. Where is the obstruction? Two answers are

available and one of them is a trap.

The trap is to locate the obstruction in the frustration itself: to hold that an unsatisfied want diminishes the wanting party's generative capacity, and that the conflict is therefore obstructive after all. The move is available in every case, since wanting something and lacking it is the condition of wanting anything at all. Taken seriously it makes every unmet want an obstruction, and a concept that applies to everything within its domain discriminates nothing within it. The move also relocates a conflict that is manifestly between two parties into the interior of one of them, which sits poorly with a framework whose commitments are relational. This answer is declined.

The second answer accepts the case as it stands and asks what would have to be true for obstruction to be present. Two conditions emerge, and either suffices.

The first is that satisfying the demand would foreclose the other party's continuations. Where a demand can be met only at the cost of the other's capacity to go on developing, the demand's satisfaction constitutes relational obstruction of the party who meets it, and the conflict falls within the framework's reach. This condition is about the content of the demand and what meeting it would cost.

The second is that the demand's frustration measurably degrades the wanting party's own capacity. This is the internal locus, and the requirement of measurability is what keeps it from collapsing into the trap. What is required is that capacity be diminished in a way describable independent of the frustration itself: continuations that were available and have ceased to be, instruments that were in use and are no longer, processes that were operating and have failed. A frustration that leaves the wanting party's capacity intact fails the condition, however sharply it is felt.

Where neither condition holds, the conflict falls outside the framework. Such conflicts occur. Two parties may want incompatible things, may argue over the incompatibility, may find the disagreement painful and durable, and may leave each other's generative capacity untouched throughout. The framework describes what such a conflict is not and leaves what it is to another account.

Claim 3. *A conflict falls within the reach of the present framework when satisfying one party's demand would foreclose the other's continuations, or when the demand's frustration degrades the wanting party's capacity in a manner describable independent of the frustration. Conflicts satisfying neither condition are real and lie outside what this framework explains.*

Three remarks on the criterion.

The criterion concerns scope and carries no evaluative content. A conflict inside the framework's reach is no worse and no more urgent than one outside it for that reason alone. What the criterion determines is which questions the framework can answer about a given case.

The criterion falls short of self-applying. Whether satisfying a demand would foreclose a party's continuations, and whether a frustration has degraded capacity independent of itself, are questions about the case that require investigation. The criterion states what to investigate and leaves the investigating undone.

The criterion inherits the reference problem left standing in §4. Both conditions turn on comparisons of capacity, and comparisons of capacity presuppose a specification of what capacity would otherwise have been. The criterion is therefore provisional in the same respect that Definition 1 is, and the provisionality is discharged, so far as it can be, in §7.

The observation with which this subsection began deserves a final word, since a reader may take it as a concession. A framework that declines to explain a class of conflicts might seem weaker than one that explains them all. The reverse holds. A framework that absorbs every case does so by a stipulation available to competing frameworks equally, and having absorbed everything it distinguishes little and forbids little. Stating where a framework fails to apply is what makes its applications informative, and supplying a criterion by which the failure can be recognized in a particular case is what makes the statement more than a disclaimer.

5.4 *Value as Orientation of Generative Direction*

The demand case established a pattern: a candidate that appears to require its own primitive, examined, resolves into a mechanism operating on capacity. Value admits the same treatment, and the treatment is worth setting out, since value is the candidate most often granted primitive standing in accounts of conflict.

The natural view holds that parties committed to incompatible values conflict in virtue of the incompatibility, and §2 entered a first qualification: normative disagreement is common and mostly inert, becoming conflictual once joined to a requirement that the other convert or submit. That qualification located the conflict in the requirement. A second and more informative account is available, and it concerns what value does to a generative process.

Values leave generation intact and operate on its direction. A system committed to a value continues to generate, with its trajectory biased toward some regions of its possibility space in preference to others. Writing ϕ for a system's generative dynamics and ϕ_v for those dynamics under a value commitment, the relation is one of orientation:

$$\phi \longmapsto \phi_v.$$

The mapping preserves generativity and redistributes it. What the system can produce remains what it could produce; which of those productions it moves toward has been reweighted.

This places value within a mode already defined. Section 4 distinguished contraction of a continuation space from deformation of it, where deformation exchanges available continuations for others of comparable range and different character. Value operates in the deformation

mode: a value commitment closes no continuation outright and biases the trajectory among those that remain. The correspondence was unforced, the mode having been introduced for other reasons, and it supplies value a place in the framework requiring no new apparatus.

The account earns its keep in the case of coupled systems, and intimacy furnishes the clearest instance. Two parties in a close coupling are frequently described as having different values, and the description is accurate at the level of what is said. What it names dynamically admits sharper statement. One party's commitments orient the coupled system toward a region characterized by career, exploration, and mobility; the other's orient it toward a region characterized by family, stability, and locality. Each orientation is coherent, each leaves the other party's capacity formally intact, and neither is an error.

The difficulty lies in the coupling. Where two systems generate jointly, they generate along one trajectory, and one trajectory admits one orientation at a time. The parties are accordingly negotiating the direction of a shared generative process in place of coordinating their separate ones, and disagreement about values is disagreement about the future dynamics of the system they jointly constitute.

Claim 4. *Value commitments operate as mechanisms of orientation: they preserve a system's generative capacity and bias its trajectory toward particular regions of its possibility space. Where two systems generate jointly, their commitments bear on one trajectory, and value disagreement is accordingly disagreement about the direction of a shared generative process.*

Three remarks, the first concerning what the claim withholds.

The orientation is descriptive throughout. What Claim 4 attributes to a value commitment is the direction it does impose, leaving aside any direction a coupling ought to follow. The distinction matters, since a preferred direction attributed to the coupling itself would reintroduce the specification §7 finds unavailable, and the reintroduction would be subject to the same objection.

The claim predicts a contrast case, and the prediction requires a criterion for jointness that the framework supplies only partially. Generation is joint, in the sense at issue, where the parties' continuation spaces are coupled such that a continuation taken by one removes continuations from the other: their trajectories are constrained to one path in the respect the orientations concern. Generation is parallel where the coupling leaves each party's continuations available whatever the other takes.

The criterion admits degrees and resists sharp application, since coupling is rarely total and rarely absent. Section 7.1 holds that parties are constituted within their couplings, from which it follows that generation between coupled parties is joint to some degree in every case, and the contrast is accordingly one of degree in place of kind. What the claim predicts, so qualified, is that value disagreement bears on conflict in proportion to the degree of jointness, and

that parties whose continuations remain mutually available can hold divergent orientations with correspondingly less conflict. This accounts for a familiar observation, that value differences tolerable between colleagues become acute between parties whose futures are jointly generated, and it is weaker than a categorical contrast would be.

The claim connects to what follows. Value commitments are symbolic in the sense §6 specifies, and they close in the manner described there: a commitment conditions which interactions are undertaken, and the interactions so conditioned supply the experience by which the commitment is assessed. Value conflicts accordingly persist beyond the conditions producing them, which distinguishes them from conflicts of the demand kind and explains their characteristic duration.

6 SYMBOLIC CLOSURE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF OBSTRUCTION

Symbolic mechanisms appeared in §5 alongside the others, and the treatment given there was the correct one: a commitment to a normative or symbolic order produces obstruction under specifiable conditions, and it takes its place in the list without privilege. This section asks what warrants extending that treatment, and answers with a single property. The property is narrow, and the narrowness is the point, since a broader claim would install symbols as a second primitive and undo the architecture of §2.

6.1 *The Property at Issue*

The modal properties of §4 included duration, and a remark was entered there which is now discharged. Obstruction that persists after the interaction producing it has ceased requires explanation, since an interaction that has ended explains nothing about what follows it. Where obstruction outlasts its cause, something has taken over the work of producing it.

Symbolic mechanisms are distinguished by their capacity to do exactly this.

Claim 5. *Symbolic mechanisms are those by which obstruction becomes self-reproducing. By fixing an interpretation, they regulate the subsequent interactions that would otherwise revise it, and obstruction so fixed persists beyond the conditions that produced it.*

The claim concerns a mode of persistence and reaches no further. It says nothing about symbols constituting subjects, mediating experience, or structuring the social field, all of which may be true and none of which this paper requires. What it says is that a mechanism which fixes interpretations occupies a distinctive position with respect to the duration property, and the position is what earns the section.

6.2 *The Mechanism of Closure*

The structure by which fixing produces persistence can be set out in steps.

An interpretation, once held, conditions what a party attends to and how it construes what it finds. This much is unremarkable and holds of interpretations generally. What matters for closure is the case where the interpretation conditions the very interactions that would supply evidence against it.

Consider a party holding the interpretation that another is hostile. The interpretation conditions its conduct: it withholds, it prepares, it declines the openings it would otherwise take. That conduct conditions the other's conduct in turn, and the other, meeting withholding and preparation, withholds and prepares in return. The first party now finds its interpretation confirmed by conduct its own interpretation helped produce. The interaction that might have revised the interpretation has been shaped by the interpretation into an interaction that confirms it.

Two features of this structure deserve marking.

The loop is closed with respect to evidence. Interactions continue to occur and continue to be interpreted, and what would count as disconfirming has been made improbable by the interpretation's own operation. The party receives evidence that its own conduct has arranged, which differs from refusing evidence. This distinguishes closure from mere stubbornness, and it is why closure resists the remedies appropriate to stubbornness.

The loop is indifferent to the accuracy of what it fixes. An interpretation that was accurate when formed closes in the same manner as one that was mistaken, and the mistaken case is the more consequential, since the loop supplies the confirmation the interpretation lacked. This connects to the observation entered in §2 about identity: identities constituted in opposition remain fully operative while inaccurate, and closure is the structure that permits it.

6.3 *Symbolic Mechanisms Among the Others*

The relation between this section and §5 requires precision, since the extension granted here is easily overread.

Symbolic mechanisms remain mechanisms. They produce obstruction in the manner the other mechanisms do, and Claim 5 adds nothing to their productive role. What Claim 5 concerns is what happens after production: the obstruction they produce has a characteristic relation to duration, and the characteristic relation is what the section describes.

The extension is available to other mechanisms under conditions. Closure is a structural property, and a non-symbolic mechanism can acquire it where its operation likewise conditions the interactions that would revise its effects. An institutional arrangement that determines who is admitted to the deliberations by which the arrangement might be changed exhibits closure in the same structural sense. What distinguishes symbolic mechanisms is that

closure is characteristic of them in place of incidental, since fixing an interpretation is what they do.

The property is a matter of degree. Interpretations are more and less firmly fixed, loops more and less tightly closed, and the openings by which revision might enter more and less numerous. Claim 5 concerns a tendency and admits the graded reading throughout.

6.4 *What This Prepares*

Closure is stated here as a general property of interpretation-fixing mechanisms. Its principal application in this paper is narrower and arrives in §7.

The reference models required by Definition 1 are interpretations of one party's generative dynamics held by another. They are accordingly subject to closure in the manner described: a model held by *A* of *B*'s dynamics conditions *A*'s conduct toward *B*, which conditions *B*'s conduct, which supplies *A* with the evidence by which the model is assessed. A model closed in this fashion has ceased to be revisable by the party it models, and the argument of §7 is that this loss of revisability, in place of the model's content, is what bears on obstruction.

Claim 5 supplies the mechanism for that argument. Closure explains how a reference model becomes unrevisable, and §7 states what follows once it has.

7 THE REFERENCE PROBLEM AND THE RIGIDITY OF WORKING MODELS

Definition 1 was left standing with a difficulty attached, and §5 inherited it twice over. The difficulty is that obstruction is comparative: a diminution of capacity is a diminution against what capacity would otherwise have been, and the comparison requires a specification of the otherwise. This section takes up the difficulty, argues that the specification cannot be supplied in the form the difficulty seems to demand, and states what follows from the failure.

7.1 *The Unavailability of a Privileged Trajectory*

The natural specification is a trajectory the system would have followed absent the interaction: what the party would have generated had the obstruction not occurred. Two arguments tell against it, and they are independent.

The first is Hume's. To speak of the trajectory a system *would* have followed, where that trajectory is doing normative work, is to move from a description of what is to a claim about what ought to have been. The move requires a warrant, and the descriptive facts alone supply none. A system's history, its constitution, and its constraints determine what it did and what it can do; they leave undetermined what it should have done. A specification of the otherwise that carried normative weight would need such a warrant, and none is available from the resources this framework admits.

The second argument is internal to the framework and, for present purposes, the more decisive. Section 3 established that generative capacity is relationally conditioned: a system's available continuations depend on the couplings it stands in. Generative Relational Being takes this further, holding that the systems in question are constituted within their couplings in place of entering couplings already formed. On this commitment the counterfactual required by the natural specification is malformed. The trajectory the party would have followed absent its couplings is unavailable for specification, since the subtraction the counterfactual requires removes the party whose trajectory was to be specified. The operation dissolves the thing it was meant to isolate.

The two arguments converge on the same result and are worth keeping distinct, since the first is a general constraint on inference and the second a consequence of this framework's own commitments. A framework with individualist commitments would face the first alone.

One consequence should be registered immediately. The concept of alienation, in the form that defines it as deviation from what a subject would authentically have become, requires exactly the specification shown unavailable. This paper accordingly declines the concept, and §4 declined it already by treating deformation of a continuation space as a change in character requiring no account of what the space ought to have contained.

7.2 *The Engineering Reading*

The unavailability of a privileged trajectory suggests two responses, and one is a false dichotomy. It might be concluded that trajectories cannot be spoken of at all, and that Definition 1 fails for want of the comparison it requires. It might alternatively be concluded that some privileged trajectory must exist after all, and the arguments above be resisted. A third position is available, and it is the one taken here.

Treat the reference trajectory as an engineering construct carrying no ontological commitment.

The move has precedent in several mature frameworks, and the precedents share a structure. In control theory, a reference trajectory is the path selected relative to a control objective; nothing in the theory holds that the system ought to follow it in any sense beyond the objective's own. In model predictive control, the reference is revised online as the horizon advances. In Bayesian inference, priors are working commitments held for their role in subsequent updating. In predictive coding, the brain operates as though it possessed a generative model of its environment, and the model is assessed by its performance in prediction and action in place of its correspondence to the environment's ultimate structure.

What these share is that the model is an instrument. It is held for what it enables, evaluated by whether it enables it, and revised when it fails to. No claim about the world's structure is entered, and none is needed.

Applied here: write $\hat{\gamma}$ for a working model of a system's generative dynamics, held by

a party for the purpose of coordination. The circumflex marks the model's status: this is a provisional construct subject to revision in place of a fact about the system it models. The model changes as interaction proceeds, and its changing is part of the dynamics under study in place of a departure from a standard external to them.

Two questions follow, and the paper's result lies in the second.

7.3 *The Justification Constraint*

The first question is what licenses the construct at all. An instrument is justified by the objective it serves, and the objective must be specified, since an instrument justified by an unspecified objective is justified by nothing.

The specification available here is narrow. A reference model is required because attributions of obstruction require a reference: to say that *A* diminished *B*'s capacity is to say that something available to *B* ceased to be available, and this states a comparison. Absent some working model of what was available, the attribution has no content. The model is accordingly the minimal apparatus that makes the primitive operational.

The narrowness of this justification is what keeps the position stable, and the point deserves emphasis because the position is easily destabilized. Should the justification be extended, so that the model serves the party's flourishing, or its authentic development, or its proper end, the ontological commitment declined in §7.1 returns under another name. The model would then be answerable to a standard beyond coordination, and the standard would be precisely what the Humean argument forbids. The engineering reading holds only while its objective remains operational.

This partially discharges the debt entered in §4. Definition 1's comparison is licensed by a working model, and the working model is licensed by its role in making the comparison operational. What the account does not supply is a guarantee that any particular model is the right one, and no such guarantee is available.

A further limitation requires statement, since it bears on how far the framework reaches and has been understated in the exposition so far.

The reference model licensed above is one held by a party to a relation, for the purpose of coordinating within it. An attribution of obstruction made by an observer outside the relation requires a reference model held by that observer, and the justification given above fails to license it. The observer coordinates with neither party and therefore lacks the objective by which a party's model was justified. An observer's model is answerable to nothing the account has specified.

Two consequences follow, and they narrow the framework's claims.

Attributions of obstruction are, on the resources assembled here, well-formed from within a relation and ill-formed from outside it. A party may say that its continuations have been foreclosed, holding a working model of what was available; a second party may say the same;

an observer saying it on their behalf is holding a model the framework cannot license. This is a considerable restriction and it is accepted.

The restriction bears on §8 and on the empirical programme of §10. A comparison of obstruction across two conditions, made by a theorist, is an observer's attribution. What the construction of §8 can establish is accordingly narrower than a demonstration that obstruction differed: it can establish that the parties' own attributions would differ, which is what §8 claims. Whether an observer's attribution can be licensed at all is left open, and §10 enters it as the framework's most pressing unresolved question.

What can be supplied, within the relation, is a condition on how models are held, and that is the subject of the following subsection.

7.4 Rigidity as the Obstruction-Relevant Variable

The second question is what distinguishes a working model held well from one held badly. Here the analogy with predictive coding requires a qualification, and the qualification yields the paper's result.

In predictive coding the model is a single system's model of an environment. The environment does not hold a model of the system, and it does not respond to being modelled. The case at issue differs in both respects. Each party holds a model of the other; each party is modelled by the other; and each is capable of revising the other's model by acting in ways the model failed to anticipate. The models are mutually referential and the modelled parties are agents.

This difference has a consequence. In the single-system case, a model that fails is corrected by the environment, which supplies disconfirming evidence indifferently. In the mutual case, whether a model is corrected depends on whether the modelling party remains open to correction by the party modelled, and this openness is a variable of the relation.

Section 6 supplies the mechanism by which openness is lost. A model held by *A* of *B*'s dynamics conditions *A*'s conduct toward *B*; *A*'s conduct conditions *B*'s conduct; and *B*'s conditioned conduct is what *A* receives as evidence bearing on the model. Where the loop closes, the model is no longer answerable to *B*, and *B*'s capacity to revise it has been removed.

Whether closure degrades the correction channel admits an argument in place of stipulation, and the argument runs as follows.

Let *A* hold a model of *B* that *A* treats as accurate. Corrections issued by *B* are received by *A* against that model, and the model determines how they are construed. Where the model is treated as accurate, a correction indicating that it is inaccurate is anomalous, and *A* has two construals available: that the model erred, or that *B*'s conduct is inconsistent. Treating the model as accurate is what makes the second construal available; a party holding its model provisionally has only the first.

Section 3 established that generation is historically conditioned, so that what a system produces enters the conditions of its subsequent production. Applied to B 's corrective conduct: corrections met with the second construal condition B 's subsequent corrective conduct, and they condition it downward, since a correction construed as inconsistency achieves less than the correction intended and costs B more than it returns. The rate of correction accordingly falls.

The consequence for A 's model is that the evidence bearing on it diminishes in the specific respect that would have disturbed it. A 's model is thereby held against a thinner correction channel, and the conditions that permitted the second construal are strengthened. This is the closure of §6 arising in the particular case of a model held of another party.

The argument requires that the model be treated as accurate in place of provisionally, and this is what the engineering reading of §7.2 was constructed to prevent. The two halves of this section are accordingly connected: the engineering reading is what keeps the second construal unavailable, and abandoning it is what permits closure to begin.

Claim 6. *A working model of another party's generative dynamics is admissible as an instrument while it remains revisable by the party it models. Where such a model comes to be treated as accurate in place of provisional, the argument above indicates that the correction channel degrades and the model tends toward unrevisability. What bears on obstruction, on this account, is the rigidity with which a model is held in place of the content the model asserts.*

Four consequences follow, and they are the section's substance.

The variable is a property of the relation. Rigidity concerns how a model is held and by whom it can be revised, both of which are facts about the coupling between the parties. It is accordingly a relational-locus phenomenon in the sense of §4, and it takes two parties to arise: a model unrevisable by the party it models presupposes a party it models.

Deviation loses its weight. Once the reference model is understood as non-ontological, a party's departure from what another's model of it predicted is model error and nothing further. The departure carries no normative significance, and the framework lacks resources with which to supply it any. This is what the declining of alienation amounts to in operational terms.

The claim is falsifiable. It predicts that unrevisable models are attended by rising obstruction, and that the relation holds with the content of the models controlled. A case in which models are held rigidly and obstruction fails to rise would tell against it, as would a case in which obstruction rises with revisability maintained. Section 8 constructs the comparison the prediction requires.

The claim connects the paper's two later concerns. Symbolic closure, treated in §6 as a general property of interpretation-fixing mechanisms, is the mechanism by which rigidity arises;

rigidity, treated here, is what closure produces when what is closed is a model of another party. The two sections describe one phenomenon at different levels of generality.

8 A CONSTRUCTED CASE: RIGIDITY WITH CONTENT HELD FIXED

Claim 6 asserts that rigidity bears on obstruction and that content does not. Establishing this requires a comparison in which content is held fixed and rigidity varies, and the comparison is constructed here for that purpose.

8.1 *The Standing of the Case*

The case that follows is constructed in place of observed, and the difference in standing should be stated before the case is given.

Its function is to isolate a variable. A theoretical claim of the form “ X bears on Y with Z controlled” requires that Z be controlled, and controlling Z in observed material is difficult where the material was generated by processes indifferent to the theorist’s purposes. A constructed case supplies the control by stipulation. What it supplies in control it forgoes in evidential weight, and it establishes nothing about frequency, magnitude, or occurrence.

The case accordingly illustrates the argument of §7.4 in place of establishing it. That argument derived the degradation of the correction channel from the treatment of a model as accurate together with the historical conditioning of §3; the construction below exhibits the derivation in a particular setting, with the content of the models held fixed so that the role of rigidity is visible. What the construction adds is legibility. What it withholds is evidence, and whether the mechanism operates outside the construction is an empirical question §10 enters as such.

One further restriction applies, entered in §7.3. Attributions of obstruction are licensed from within a relation and unlicensed from outside it. The comparison below is accordingly stated in terms of what the parties’ own attributions would be, in place of a claim about obstruction made on their behalf.

The reader’s test is accordingly narrow. It is whether the two conditions below differ in one respect alone. Should they differ in a second, the case fails to isolate what it claims to isolate, and the objection is decisive.

8.2 *The Construction*

Two parties, A and B , stand in a coupling within which they generate jointly: a shared undertaking whose trajectory depends on both. One decision before them requires that its timing be settled.

Each holds a working model of the other’s generative dynamics in the sense of §7. A ’s model of B : B is establishing a body of work whose early phase admits little interruption, and

B requires roughly three years in place before a change of circumstance is viable. *B*'s model of *A*: *A*'s work is portable, and *A* can absorb a change of circumstance at short notice.

Three features of these models should be marked, since the construction depends on them.

They are substantively reasonable. Each is the sort of model a party would form on the evidence available, and neither is careless. Nothing in the case turns on either party being a poor modeller.

They concern generative dynamics in place of preferences. *A*'s model states what *B*'s work requires, leaving aside what *B* wants. This distinguishes the case from a disagreement about aims and locates it where Claim 6 operates.

They are inaccurate in some measure, and both are. *B*'s third year is in fact the flexible one and the first two are not; *A*'s portability is real in respect of equipment and unreal in respect of the collaborators *A* works among. The inaccuracy is stipulated because it is required: a comparison in which one condition contains error and the other does not would vary two things.

8.3 *The Two Conditions*

Condition I: models revisable.

B states that the third year is the flexible one. *A* receives this and adjusts the model accordingly. *A* states that portability holds for equipment and fails for collaborators. *B* receives this and adjusts in turn. Each correction is occasioned by conduct or statement the existing model failed to anticipate, and each is incorporated.

The disagreement about timing persists. It may persist for a considerable period, since the adjusted models place the parties' constraints in tension and the tension is real. What the parties possess throughout is a model of the other that tracks the other's dynamics within the tolerance their coordination requires. Neither is planning against a fiction. Obstruction remains low: the continuations available to each are affected by the coupling as any coupling affects them, and neither party's capacity is diminished by the other's model of it.

Condition II: one model unrevisable.

The models are as before, in content and in accuracy. *A*'s model of *B* has closed in the sense of §6: it conditions *A*'s conduct toward *B*, and the conduct so conditioned supplies the evidence by which *A* assesses the model.

The sequence proceeds as §7.4 indicates. *B*'s constraints develop, as constraints do, and *A* continues to plan against the model as originally formed. *A*'s proposals are accordingly mistimed relative to *B*'s actual position. *B* corrects, as in Condition I. *A* receives the correction against a model on which the correction should not have been required, and construes it as inconsistency in *B* in place of error in the model. *B*, meeting this construal, corrects less often, since correction is met with a construal that penalizes correcting. *B*'s dynamics become less

legible to *A* in consequence, and *A*'s model, now meeting less that would disturb it, is held with increased confidence.

What has been diminished is *B*'s capacity to develop under this coupling. *B*'s continuations are shaped by a model *B* can no longer affect, and the shaping proceeds by *A*'s conduct, which the model conditions. This is relational obstruction in the sense of §4, and it accumulates in the manner §6 describes, persisting beyond the conditions that produced it.

8.4 *What the Comparison Shows*

The conditions are identical in the content of both models, in the accuracy of both models, and in the substance of the disagreement. They differ in whether one model is held provisionally or as accurate, and in the revisability that follows. The obstruction each party would attribute is low in the first condition and accumulating in the second.

Three competing readings require exclusion, since each would explain the difference without recourse to rigidity.

The difference is error. It might be held that *A* was simply wrong about *B*, and that being wrong accounts for what follows. The reading fails on the construction. *A* is wrong in Condition I to the same degree and in the same respects, and no obstruction accumulates there. Error occurs in both conditions and is absorbed in one of them. What differs is whether the error is correctable by the party it concerns, and this is rigidity in place of error.

The difference is disagreement. It might be held that the parties disagreed and that disagreement produced the obstruction. The reading fails likewise. The disagreement about timing is present in both conditions and persists in Condition I without obstruction. Removing the rigidity from Condition II leaves the disagreement standing and workable.

The difference was stipulated. It might be held that the construction builds in the feedback that produces its result, so that the loop is observed because it was assumed. This objection would be decisive against a construction offered as evidence, and it is answered by the standing entered in §8.1. The feedback is derived in §7.4 from the treatment of a model as accurate together with the historical conditioning of generation, and the construction exhibits the derivation in place of assuming it. What remains stipulated is the setting, which is what a constructed case supplies.

The difference is bad faith. It might be held that *A* in Condition II is acting in bad faith, and that the case describes a moral failing in place of a structural one. The construction excludes this. *A*'s construal of *B*'s corrections as inconsistency follows from the model *A* holds: on that model, the corrections should not have been necessary, and a party who takes its model to be accurate has grounds for the construal. The mechanism operates without ill intent, which is consistent with the silence about intention entered at Definition 1 and is a point in favour of the claim in place of against it.

8.5 *Scale*

The construction has been stated with two parties whose coupling is close, and a question arises about what the argument requires of that setting.

The argument requires two systems generating jointly, each holding a working model of the other's dynamics, with the models bearing on conduct. Nothing in it requires that the systems be individuals. States hold models of other states' developmental constraints and act on them; institutions hold models of the populations they administer; research communities hold models of the programmes they assess. In each, the model conditions conduct, the conduct conditions what the modelled party does, and the loop closes or remains open.

This is a substantive claim in place of an assumption, and it is defended by the structure of the case: the construction refers to properties of the modelling relation throughout, and refers nowhere to properties peculiar to persons. Should the claim fail, the failure would consist in some property of the modelling relation that holds between persons and fails between collectives, and identifying such a property would be a contribution the framework would need to absorb. Section 10 enters the question.

The scale-invariance claim carries a consequence worth stating. If it holds, the case of §8 bears on the international setting with which §2 began, and the realist observation that states misread one another's constraints becomes an instance of the mechanism described here in place of a separate phenomenon. Establishing this would require the comparison of the present framework with power-based accounts that this paper defers, and §10 names it as the first item of subsequent work.

9 WHAT THE FRAMEWORK DECLINES AND WHAT THE DECLINING COSTS

A framework built by subtraction owes an account of what it removed. This section states what has been declined, why, and at what cost, since a limitation entered without its cost is a limitation understated.

9.1 *The Normative Layer*

Justice, fairness, value in its evaluative sense, ethics, and happiness have been absent throughout, and their absence is deliberate. The reason is architectural. Each would enter as a further primitive, and a framework attempting a minimal primitive base cannot admit further primitives while the first remains undischarged. The order proposed is that obstruction be worked out first, and that normative questions be raised on that basis by whoever finds the basis sound.

The cost is considerable and should be stated plainly. The framework, as it stands, distinguishes obstruction from its absence and declines to rank obstructions. It supplies no ground for holding that one party's foreclosure of another's continuations is objectionable. It supplies

no ground for preferring less obstruction to more. A reader who asks what follows practically from the account receives, at this stage, the answer that nothing follows practically, since practical conclusions require premises the account withholds.

One consequence of the paper's own argument sharpens this. Section 7 established that reference trajectories carry no ontological standing, from which it follows that a party's departure from another's model of it is model error carrying no normative weight. Whatever normative purchase the notion of a trajectory once seemed to offer is thereby withdrawn. What survives as a candidate for normative treatment is unrevisability, which is a property of a relation and would require its own argument. The framework identifies the candidate and stops.

9.2 *Intention*

Definition 1 attaches to what an interaction does to capacity and remains silent about what the interacting party intended. The silence keeps the primitive mechanical, and §8 showed the silence earning its place, since the case turns on a mechanism operating without ill intent.

The cost is that moral assessment requires the distinction the framework withholds. Harm inflicted knowingly and harm inflicted in the course of reasonable conduct differ in ways any account of responsibility must register, and the present account registers neither. A framework wishing to support such assessment would need to reintroduce intention as a further term, and the reintroduction would carry consequences for the primitive that this paper has not examined.

9.3 *Alienation*

The concept has been declined twice, at §4 and §7, and for the same reason: in the form that defines it as departure from what a subject would authentically have become, it requires a specification of the authentic that the arguments of §7 find unavailable.

A second exclusion operates alongside the first and was entered in §4. Cases of the alienation kind involve deformation of a continuation space, and deformation stands outside the partial order on which Definition 1 rests. Such cases are therefore excluded twice: once for want of the authentic baseline, and once for want of any relation between the spaces the order can supply.

What has been retained is the description. A system whose continuations have been exchanged for others of comparable extent has undergone a change of character, and this is statable without reference to what the continuations ought to have been. Whether such a change constitutes obstruction is left open by the framework, and the openness is a gap in place of a position.

What has been forgone is the critical force the concept carried. To say that an arrangement alienates is to condemn it; to say that it deforms a continuation space is to describe it. The de-

scription is available to the framework and the condemnation is not, and a reader who valued the concept for its critical force will find the substitute thin. The reply available is that critical force resting on an unavailable specification is force borrowed against an account nobody has supplied, and that identifying the debt is worth something. Whether it is worth what it costs is a fair question and is left open.

9.4 *Attribution from Outside a Relation*

Section 7.3 found that the account licenses reference models held by parties to a relation and fails to license models held by observers outside it. This restricts the framework more severely than the exposition of §4 through §5 suggested, and the restriction is stated here in full.

Attributions of obstruction are, on the resources assembled, well-formed from within a relation. A party holding a working model of what was available to it may say that continuations were foreclosed. An observer saying so on that party's behalf holds a model the account cannot license, since the observer coordinates with no one and the justification of §7.3 was a justification by coordination.

What this costs is most of what a social-scientific framework is ordinarily wanted for. Third-party assessment, comparison across cases, and aggregate claims about obstruction in a population are all observer attributions. The framework in its present state supports none of them, and a reader whose interest was in such assessment should regard the account as not yet serving it.

Two mitigations are available and neither is developed here. An observer's model might be licensed by a coordination objective of the observer's own, in which case attributions would be relative to that objective and would require its statement. Or an observer might report the parties' attributions in place of making one, which is available and considerably weaker. Which of these can be made to work is entered in §10 as the framework's most pressing open question.

9.5 *The Vagueness of Relational Significance*

Definition 2 converts obstruction into conflict by way of relational significance, and §5 offered a candidate threshold without confidence. The candidate rests on the parties' working models, which §7 finds to be of limited standing, and it may prove too permissive. What can be said in mitigation was said there: the vagueness attaches to the manifestation and leaves the primitive alone, so that the framework's sharper question is the one it is built on. What cannot be said is that the vagueness is harmless. A framework whose central derived concept has an imprecise threshold will yield disputed classifications in the cases where classification matters most.

9.6 *The Enumeration of Mechanisms*

The mechanisms treated in §5 number seven, and their selection was governed by their standing in the existing literature in place of any principle internal to the framework. Others exist. Honour, grievance, and the emotions have claims to inclusion and have been omitted, and no argument has been offered that the seven are jointly exhaustive or individually irreducible.

This is a real gap and its shape should be understood. The framework's claim concerns the phenomenon these mechanisms produce, which leaves the enumeration incomplete by design. What the incompleteness costs is any account of how mechanisms relate to one another: whether some reduce to others, whether they compose in regular ways, whether the list admits a principled closure. These are questions the framework poses and does not answer.

10 DIRECTIONS FOR SUBSEQUENT WORK

The items below are ordered by their bearing on the framework's standing, beginning with those on which it is most exposed.

10.1 *The Licensing of Observer Attributions*

This is the framework's most pressing unresolved question, and its resolution conditions most of what follows.

Section 7.3 licensed reference models by their role in coordination, which restricts well-formed attributions of obstruction to parties within a relation. Whether an observer's attribution can be licensed at all is open. Three routes suggest themselves. An observer might be granted a coordination objective of its own, relative to which its model would be licensed and its attributions indexed. An observer might be restricted to reporting the parties' attributions, which is available at once and yields a considerably weaker framework. Or the justification of §7.3 might be replaced by one that does not run through coordination, in which case the argument of that subsection would require reworking throughout.

Until one of these is developed, the framework's claims should be read as claims about what parties to a relation can say of it.

10.2 *Extension of the Ordering*

Definition 1 rests on a partial order, and the incomparable cases stand outside it. Whether the order can be extended to reach the deformation cases without importing evaluative commitments is open. What would be required is a relation between continuation spaces of comparable extent and different character that is neither a measure of size nor a ranking by worth. Whether such a relation exists is a question about the structure of continuation spaces, and it is prior to the formalization described below.

10.3 *Comparison with Power-Based Accounts*

The framework's claim to have gained something over the traditions surveyed in §2 has been argued and remains untested. What would test it is a case that a power-based account explains well, treated in both vocabularies, with the differences in what each account sees recorded. The case would need to be historical in place of constructed, since what is at issue is explanatory purchase on material neither framework arranged.

Section 8 indicates where such a case would be found. If the scale-invariance argument holds, the misreading of one state's developmental constraints by another is an instance of the rigidity mechanism, and cases in which such misreading persisted through changing capability distributions would separate the accounts. A power-based account attributes the persistence to the distribution; the present account attributes it to closure of the models, which is a distinct claim admitting distinct evidence.

10.4 *Empirical Test of the Rigidity Claim*

Claim 6 is falsifiable and untested. Testing it requires the comparison of §8 in observed material: cases in which the content of parties' models of one another is comparable and their revisability differs. The prediction is that obstruction accumulates with unrevisability and remains low with revisability maintained.

Two difficulties attend the test and should be anticipated. Revisability is a dispositional property and is observed through its exercise, so that a model never challenged supplies no evidence of whether it would have yielded. And obstruction requires the comparison of capacities, which §7 showed to rest on working models held by the observer as much as by the parties. Neither difficulty is peculiar to this framework, and neither is dissolved by noting that.

10.5 *Formalization*

The apparatus has been kept in prose throughout, and the abstention was deliberate: a formalism introduced before the objects are stable decorates the argument in place of advancing it. The objects are now stated with sufficient precision that formalization is a reasonable next step, and three questions would organize it. What structure represents a continuation space, given that it admits contraction, expansion, and deformation, and that deformation preserves extent. How does obstruction propagate and accumulate along a trajectory, given its path-dependence. And what conditions on a relation correspond to the revisability of a model held within it.

The connection to dynamical systems is the natural one to pursue, with generative dynamics answering to a flow, continuation spaces to reachable sets, and closure to the formation of

an invariant region. Whether these correspondences survive contact with the phenomena is the question such work would settle.

10.6 *The Formation and Dissolution of Closure*

Section 6 described closure and left its dynamics unexamined. What conditions bring a loop to close, and what conditions open one that has closed, are questions the framework poses and requires other resources to answer. The second is of particular interest, since closure is described here as self-reproducing, and the mechanisms by which self-reproducing structures come apart are less obvious than those by which they form.

10.7 *Scale-Invariance*

Section 8 claimed that the rigidity mechanism holds wherever two systems generate jointly while modelling one another, and defended the claim structurally. The claim is open to refutation by the identification of a property of the modelling relation that holds between persons and fails between collectives, and such a property may exist. Collectives model through procedures, and procedures may close in ways individuals do not, or resist closing in ways individuals cannot.

10.8 *The Threshold of Relational Significance*

Definition 2's threshold was offered provisionally in §5 and may prove too permissive. What is wanted is a condition distinguishing obstruction that organizes a relation from obstruction the parties absorb, stated in terms the framework can support and tested against cases where the classification is disputed.

10.9 *The Normative Layer*

Whatever normative theory is built on this basis would begin from the candidate §9 identified: unrevisability, as a property of relations, is what remains after trajectories have been deprived of normative standing. Why a relation's openness to revision by its parties should carry normative weight is a question this framework poses and lacks the resources to answer. It is the question a second paper would take up.

11 CLOSING

Thesis. *Conflict is proposed as the manifestation of generative obstruction within constrained relational dynamics. The present work refrains from exhausting the mechanisms through which such obstruction arises, aiming to establish a minimal foundation on which mathematical, symbolic, and normative theories may be built.*

What the paper has added to that proposal is one substantive result and a clearer view of what the proposal costs. The result: attributions of obstruction require reference models; reference models admit no ontological standing; a model treated as accurate degrades the channel by which it would be corrected; and what bears on obstruction is accordingly the rigidity with which such models are held in place of the content they assert. The cost: the primitive is defined by a partial order that leaves deformation cases unclassified, and attributions are licensed from within a relation while remaining unlicensed from outside one. Both are entered in §10 as open, and the second conditions how far the rest should be read.