Towards Generative Relational Governance

Discussion I

Abstract

This discussion reconsiders governance from the standpoint of a generative relational ontology, and it proceeds as a delineation of a problem space rather than as the presentation of a theory. Its premise is that if being and knowing are generative, governance too may have to be understood as a generative process rather than as the administration of a stable structure. On this premise the received framings of governance, oriented toward the allocation of resources, the distribution of power, the design of institutions, and the sources of legitimacy, become insufficient, since they presuppose a structure that holds still while a generative field does not. The commons literature is taken as the point of departure, for it has shown that value arises from relation; the discussion extends it by observing that relation generates power in the same movement by which it generates value. From this observation two difficulties are assembled. Generation produces power that tends toward stabilization, structure, and finally an attractor, so that generation tends to terminate its own generativity. And the remedy of oversight upon oversight runs into an infinite regress that liberal constitutionalism, socialism, and the commons all encounter alike. Both difficulties may be artifacts of taking structure, rather than generation, as the object of inquiry. Since relational practice is inescapably multi-scale, carried on at the scales of intimacy, organization, community, and international order at once, the inquiry further requires a bridge across scales, for which renormalization is named as an open intuition rather than a result. The questions that follow are set out as a four-phase research program, running from the definition of generativity, through its dynamics and its transformation across scales, to the governance of generativity itself. No theory is established and no institutional design is proposed. The contribution is a proposal that the object of governance may have been misidentified, and that its primary object is generativity rather than structure.

Keywords: generative relational ontology; governance; commons; power and value; infinite regress; attractor; multi-scale relational practice; renormalization; research program; change of object.

A note on the standing of this discussion. It does not attempt to establish a theory of generative relational governance. It aims instead to identify a set of conceptual difficulties that appear once governance is reconsidered from the standpoint of a generative relational ontology. These are research notes rather than a finished argument. Their purpose is to show why the existing ways of posing the problem of governance have become insufficient, and to assemble, as clearly as possible, the questions that a generative account would have to answer. The questions are offered without their answers. A mature theory, if it comes, is left to later discussions and to the milestone papers that may follow.

1 Governance as an Ontological Question

The starting point is not a political preference but an ontological one. If being is generative, as Generative Relational Being holds, and if knowing is likewise generative, as its epistemological extension holds, then a question follows that is rarely asked directly. Whether governance too should be understood as a generative process, rather than as the administration of a settled order.

Posed this way, governance becomes an ontological question before it is an administrative one. The conventional framing treats governance as the management of a given society: a structure exists, and the task is to run it well. But if relation is continually generative, if the field being governed does not sit still, then the object of governance is not a fixed structure to be administered. It is a process of generation that is itself in motion. This discussion takes that reframing as its point of departure and asks what difficulties emerge once it is taken seriously.

2 The Insufficiency of the Received Framings

The received theories of governance are not to be dismissed. They have addressed, with great care, a definite set of problems: the allocation of scarce resources, the distribution of power, the design of institutions, and the sources of legitimacy. Each of these remains real. The observation here is narrower and concerns a shared presupposition rather than any particular failing.

The received framings largely presuppose a relatively stable social structure. They ask how to allocate, distribute, design, and legitimate within a field that holds still long enough to be administered. The presupposition is reasonable for many purposes and it is not being called false. It is being called insufficient for the case that concerns this inquiry. Where relation is continually generative, the field itself changes as it is governed, and the object of governance shifts from a structure to a process of generation. What the received theories govern is structure. What a generative account would have to govern is generation. The gap between these two is the space this discussion tries to open.

3 The Commons and the Limit It Reveals

A body of recent work has already moved partway into this space, and it is worth marking both what it found and where it stops. The study of the commons, from Ostrom's analysis of self-governing resource systems through the frameworks of generative justice, grassroots economics, and Eglash's account of unalienated value circulation, converges on a single discovery. Value arises from relation, and sustainable systems return value to the relations that generate it rather than extracting it away.

This is a real advance, and this discussion inherits it. But inheriting it also brings a limit into view. These accounts show that relation generates value. They attend less to a second thing that relation generates at the same time. The generation of value is accompanied by the generation of power. A relational field that produces value also produces asymmetries, dependencies, and positions of advantage, and it does so through the very same activity by which it produces value. The commons literature has taught us to see value circulate through relation. It has not equally taught us to see power crystallize through relation. That second process is where the difficulties of this discussion begin.

4 The First Difficulty: Generation Produces Power

The first difficulty can be stated as a proposition. The generation of value produces power as an accompaniment that cannot be wished away. Wherever relation generates value, it also generates differential positions within the relational field, and these positions tend to stabilize.

The sequence is worth making explicit, because each step is ordinary and the cumulative effect is not. Generation produces power. Power tends toward stabilization. Stabilization hardens into structure. Structure settles into an attractor. Each transition is the sort of thing that happens of itself, without anyone intending it, and the endpoint is a fixed configuration that the original generation now serves to maintain rather than to renew. The difficulty this poses for governance is not the familiar one of how to eliminate power, which is neither possible nor, stated so baldly, coherent. It is the subtler problem of how to prevent generation from terminating generation. A generative field, left to its own dynamics, tends to produce the very structures that arrest its generativity. How a system might keep generating without generating its own closure is the first question this discussion cannot answer and wishes to pose precisely.

5 The Second Difficulty: Infinite Regress

The second difficulty appears as soon as one imagines a remedy for the first. Suppose that power, having accumulated, must be checked by some countervailing force or oversight. That oversight is itself a position within the relational field, and it too generates power and tends to stabilize. It therefore requires oversight in turn, and that further oversight requires its own, without any evident end. The regress is not a rhetorical trick. It is the genuine structural problem of who watches the watchers, followed to its conclusion.

What this discussion wishes to note is not a solution but a pattern. The regress is not pecu-

liar to one tradition. Liberal constitutionalism meets it in the question of what constrains the constraining power and what grounds the ground. Socialism meets it in the question of what prevents the organ that supervises on behalf of the people from becoming an unsupervised power of its own. The commons meets it in the question of what governs the governance of a self-governing community. Three very different traditions arrive at the same wall. That they all arrive there suggests the regress is not a defect of any one design but a feature of the problem itself, and any generative account of governance will have to say something about it. This discussion only marks its universality and leaves the wall standing.

6 A Change of Object: The Dynamics of Generativity

The third difficulty is the most productive, because it suggests that the two preceding difficulties may be artifacts of how the object has been posed. The received response to the regress is to build structure upon structure: a meta-structure to oversee the structure, a meta-meta-structure to oversee that, and so upward. This response takes structure as the object and multiplies it, and the regress is the natural consequence of that choice.

A different response would change the object rather than multiply it. Instead of studying structure and its endless meta-levels, one might study generation and its dynamics, and ask after the properties of a generative process rather than the architecture of a structural one. The relevant questions would then no longer be about how to stack oversight upon oversight, but about what properties keep a generative process open. Candidate properties suggest themselves, and they are offered here only as candidates: openness, the capacity to keep producing the new; reversibility, the capacity to undo a hardening before it sets; resilience, the capacity to absorb disturbance without collapse; and diversity, the maintenance of variety against convergence onto a single attractor. Whether these are the right properties, and how they might be characterized with any precision, is not settled here. What is proposed is only that shifting the object of inquiry, from the properties of structures to the properties of generation, may be the move that lets the earlier difficulties be restated in a tractable form. This shift is the central suggestion of the discussion, and it is a suggestion about how to pose the problem, not a claim to have solved it.

7 The Many Scales of Relational Practice

Before any inspiration from other fields is invoked, the reason the inquiry reaches beyond a single scale should be made plain, because it follows from the subject itself and not from a borrowed method. We do not stand outside relation looking in. We are situated within a vast relational system, the system of relations among persons, and among persons and the world. A generative relational account is meant to hold of that system. But the system is never given to us whole and at once. Practice compels us to observe it, and to act within it, at different scales.

The same generative relational framework is brought to bear on the intimate relation between two persons, on the relations within an organization, on the relations within a community, on the relations among organizations, and on the relations among states. These are not five differ-

ent systems requiring five different theories. They are the same relational system observed and practiced at different scales. What we call an intimate relation and what we call an international order are the near and the far view of one continuous relational fabric. This is why the earlier isomorphism, the recurrence of the same generative structure at every level, is not a curiosity but a condition of the subject. Any account adequate to relational being must be an account that holds across these scales at once.

From this a requirement follows that the received framings never had to face. If the same generative system must be practiced at the scale of the couple and at the scale of the state system, then we need a bridge between the scales, a disciplined way of passing from one scale of relational practice to another and of understanding how a generative account at one scale relates to the account at the next. Without such a bridge, the framework fragments into disconnected applications, each re-derived by hand, with no principled relation among them. The need for a bridge across scales is therefore not an ornament added to the inquiry. It is forced by the fact that relational practice is inescapably multi-scale.

8 An Intuition Toward a Bridge

It is at this point, and only at this point, that a family of ideas from the study of complex systems becomes suggestive. They are introduced here as intuition and open direction, not as the theoretical basis of anything argued above, and the distinction matters enough to be stated flatly. Nothing in the difficulties assembled so far depends on these ideas. They are offered because the requirement just named, a bridge across scales, resembles a problem that other fields have had to solve.

Several notions seem to touch it. The attractor, toward which an undriven system settles, is the formal image of the structural fixation described earlier. Self-organization, the emergence of order without an external orderer, speaks to generation without a central generator. And scale itself, the recognition that the same system may look different, or the same, at different levels of resolution, is exactly the feature that the multi-scale character of relational practice forces upon us. Among these, one body of ideas is worth naming directly, because it is the one that in physics was developed precisely to bridge scales. Renormalization is the systematic study of how a system's effective description transforms as one passes between finer and coarser scales, and of what is preserved and what washes out in that passage. If relational practice is inescapably multi-scale, and if what is needed is a principled bridge among scales, then renormalization is a natural candidate for the form such a bridge might take.

This is named as a conjecture and an invitation, not as a result, and its limits are acknowledged in the same breath. This discussion offers no coarse-graining operator on relational fields, no generating functional, and no flow equations, and it would be a misreading to take the word renormalization here as a claim that such objects are in hand. The claim is only that the multi-scale structure of relational practice makes a renormalization-like bridge worth seeking, and that the search is a defined direction rather than a vague hope. The construction itself belongs to work that follows this discussion, not to this discussion.

9 A Research Program

The questions that emerge, once governance is reconsidered from a generative relational standpoint, arrange themselves into an ordered program rather than a loose list. Setting them out as phases is not a promise that they will be answered in sequence, but a way of showing that they are stages of a single inquiry, each presupposing the one before.

The first phase concerns definition. What is generativity, characterized precisely enough that one could say of a relational process how generative it is, and whether it is becoming more or less so. Without this, the later phases have no object.

The second phase concerns dynamics. How does generativity evolve. Given a characterization of generativity, one asks how it changes under a relational system's own motion, whether it tends to grow, to decay toward an attractor, or to be sustained, and what conditions distinguish these fates. This is where the first difficulty, the tendency of generation to terminate its own generativity, would be studied rather than merely named.

The third phase concerns scale. How does generativity transform as one passes across relational scales, from the intimate to the organizational to the international. This is where the bridge is to be built, and where the renormalization intuition would either be made precise or be set aside. Here belong the subsidiary questions of what a relational scale is, of what coarse-graining a relational field into a collective subject retains and loses, and of whether there exist invariants preserved across scales that could serve as the stable objects a generative account holds onto in place of fixed structures.

The fourth phase concerns governance proper. How should governance regulate generativity rather than structures. Only once the first three phases have given generativity a definition, a dynamics, and a behavior across scales does it become possible to ask, without vacancy, what it would mean to govern for the sake of generativity, and how such governance would meet the difficulties of power and regress from which this discussion began. This is the phase toward which the whole program points, and it is the last, not the first.

10 The Standing of This Discussion

It remains to say plainly what this discussion has and has not done. It has not established a theory of generative relational governance, and it has not proposed an institutional design. It has tried to show that the received ways of posing the problem of governance, framed around the administration of a stable structure, become insufficient once relation is taken to be continually generative, and it has assembled the difficulties that this reframing brings into view: that generation produces power and tends toward its own closure, that the remedy of oversight runs into an infinite regress shared across traditions, and that both difficulties may be artifacts of taking structure rather than generation as the object of inquiry. It has argued that relational practice is inescapably multi-scale and therefore in need of a bridge across scales, and it has named, as an open intuition, the direction in which such a bridge might be sought.

The contribution of this discussion is therefore not a theory of governance, but a proposal that

the object of governance itself may have been misidentified. If governance is reconsidered from the standpoint of generative relational being, the primary object is no longer structure but generativity itself. Whether this change of object proves fruitful remains an open question, but it is this possibility that the discussions that follow seek to explore.

End of Discussion I. What is offered here is a problem space and a program, not a theory. The bridge across scales that the program requires, and the renormalization intuition named for it, are taken up in the discussion that follows.