

Rethinking Transcendence

Towards a Generative Relational Theory of Divinity

Wanhong Huang

huangwanhong@serendip.ngo

Abstract

Neural systems acquire structure, memory and functional differentiation under local rules alone, and the observation invites an inference: that the central institutions by which human communities coordinate belief are historical contingencies which a sufficiently distributed arrangement could dispense with. This paper argues that the inference fails. The self-organizing systems ordinarily adduced presuppose a lawgiver, since the rules under which they organize are fixed exogenously and the elements obeying those rules lack the standing to revise them. Human communities generate the constraints under which they live without such a source and without inductive warrant, and their central institutions are read here as provisional stabilizations of belief under finite rationality. A second obstacle, and the point from which the inquiry began, holds that a subject requires an other standing in the place of a power exceeding the subject itself, upon which its own subjecthood is witnessed. The paper proposes that what recurs across history is the reification of a generative constraint, of which concentration in a distinguished carrier is one form, and offers as an open hypothesis, stated together with the observations that would refute it, that such constraints recur through a succession of carriers, among which the forms human civilizations have called divinity are to be counted. A criterion is proposed for distinguishing a carrier that bears trans-subjectivity from one that has appropriated it: whether the revision of the constraint it carries remains open to the relations that generate it.

Keywords: transcendence; trans-subjectivity; relational constraint; reification; the law-giver problem; finite rationality; nomos; distributed regulation.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a position paper and is offered as one. It reviews no literature systematically; the authors drawn upon are drawn upon at the points where the argument requires them, and the omissions are many. Its claims are conceptual, and the three that carry the most weight, that a subject requires an other upon which its subjecthood is witnessed, that self-organizing systems presuppose what human communities lack, and that transcendence is a mode of undergoing a constraint, are stated in a form that permits them to be attacked. Its principal proposal is a hypothesis, offered for testing and stated with the observations that would tell against it. The paper also leaves open the question it raises, whether concentration is a permanent requirement of human communities or one historical realization of a requirement admitting others. Objection, correction and counter-evidence are welcome at huangwanhong@serendip.ngo.

Table 1: Regulation classified by the problem addressed and by the disposition of the regulating mechanism.

	<i>Concentrated regulation</i>	<i>Distributed regulation</i>
Allocative	state, fiscal authority	market
Coordinative	bureaucratic hierarchy	commons arrangements (Ostrom, 1990)
Interpretive	academic and juridical authority	open review, distributed adjudication
Generative	(thinly occupied)	self-organizing systems

1 INTRODUCTION

The persistence of central regulation is ordinarily posed as a question about institutions and their fate, and in that form it invites an answer from outside the institutions themselves. The natural sciences appear to supply one. Nervous systems regulate themselves without a concentrated authority. Under spike-timing-dependent plasticity, synaptic strengths are modified according to the relative timing of pre- and postsynaptic activity, a rule that is entirely local; from the repeated application of that local rule across a population there arise learning, memory, functional differentiation and coordinated global behaviour (Bi & Poo, 1998; Hebb, 1949). No committee apportions functions among cortical areas, and no adjudicator resolves disputes between synapses. The global order is real, and it is the decision of no party.

If a system of that complexity regulates itself without a concentrated authority, a question presses: why should the regulation of generativity in human communities require one? States, courts, academies, professional bodies and the other institutions that determine what a population shall provisionally believe would then appear as contingencies of a particular historical moment, defensible on grounds of convenience alone, and dispensable in principle. The inference has considerable currency and it is reasonable on its face. It is, however, incomplete in a way that this paper takes to be decisive.

The incompleteness becomes visible once the typology of regulation is set out along two axes. Regulation may be classified by what it regulates, namely the allocation of goods, the coordination of action, the interpretation of rules, or the conditions of generation; and independently by whether the regulating mechanism is concentrated in a distinguished position or distributed across the participants. The two axes cross, and the crossing yields the familiar occupants shown in Table 1.

The lower-right cell of Table 1 is where the neural example sits, and the lower-left cell is conspicuously hard to fill. A framework committed to generation would seem, on the strength of the table alone, to belong on the distributed side, and an argument for the eventual dissolu-

tion of concentrated carriers would follow. Two obstacles stand in the way, and this paper is organized around them.

The first obstacle concerns what the systems in the lower-right cell presuppose. Under spike-timing-dependent plasticity, the elements have no part in selecting the rule they obey. The form of the learning window, the width of the timing dependence and the dynamics of the membrane are given to the system, whether by a modeller in the artificial case or by evolutionary and physical history in the biological one. The local rule is the precondition of self-organization and stands outside its achievements. Human communities are differently placed. They generate the constraints under which they will live, they have no external source to consult about those constraints, and by Hume's argument the regularity of past experience licenses no inference that a constraint will continue to hold (Hume, 1739). Read in this light, the central institutions of a human community appear as provisional stabilizations of belief under a finitude that admits no external remedy.

The second obstacle concerns the constitution of subjects. The standing of a subject and the bindingness of a norm have historically required a source held to exceed any particular party, a position occupied by a creator, by the cosmos, by a symbolic order and by the modern institutions that inherited it (Lacan, 1977; Durkheim, 1912; Feuerbach, 1841). Where a concentrated carrier occupies that position, its removal in the absence of a successor leaves a vacancy, and vacancies of this kind are seldom observed to persist.

The present inquiry began from a single formulation of that obstacle, and the formulation is stated here in the form it took, since everything that follows is an attempt to say what it commits one to.

Hypothesis 1.1. (The witnessing other). *A human subject must find some other that stands in the place of a power exceeding the subject itself, and upon which its own subjecthood is witnessed. Where one such other is withdrawn, the requirement persists, and a further other is found to occupy the place that was vacated.*

Three features of this formulation govern the argument that follows. It concerns a place and leaves the identity of its occupant open, which is what permits the succession of occupants to be studied as a succession. It is stated as a hypothesis and carries the standing of one: Section 4 assembles the convergent testimony of otherwise incompatible traditions in its support, and Section 8 states the observation that would tell against it, namely a community that sustains generation over a long period while appealing to nothing held as exceeding the parties who propose it. And it fixes the object of the paper. A question about the fate of concentrated institutions concerns one class of occupants; the requirement stated here concerns the place they occupy, and the two questions come apart at every point where they have been treated as one.

Both obstacles are real, and the account offered here relocates them. The claim of the pa-

per is that the question they were made to answer, whether concentration must persist, has been misposed, and that the phenomenon actually recurring is an operation performed upon constraints.

Claim 1.2. (Central claim). *What recurs in human history is the reification of generative constraints, of which concentration in a distinguished carrier is one form. A relation is the constraint under which generation unfolds within a historical process, and transcendence is treated here as a name for the manner in which such a constraint is undergone, as belonging to no party while binding all parties, including whoever proposed it. Deities, symbolic orders, states, currencies, scientific communities and their possible successors are proposed as historical carriers of a constraint that none of them originates. Because such a constraint resists exhibition, it is repeatedly identified with its carrier; and a carrier that has come to present itself as the source of what it carries is what is ordinarily called a center. The term relational divinity is therefore auxiliary. Retained as the name of a thing, it would commit the account to the very error it was constructed to diagnose.*

Hypothesis 1.3. (Recurrence of trans-subjective constraints). *The trans-subjective generative constraints which make shared meaning, order and becoming possible recur across history through a succession of carriers, and the forms that human civilizations have called divinity are among those in which such constraints have been borne.*

The hypothesis is offered in that form deliberately, and two features of its wording carry the weight. It is a claim about recurrence, and it leaves the reference of the word “divinity” untouched; a hypothesis about reference would be reductive by construction, and would dispose of questions that lie beyond the means of this paper. And it is partial: it counts the forms in question among the carriers of such constraints, and it leaves open whether anything further is at issue in them. A reader who holds that a deity exists, a reader who holds that none does, and a reader whose tradition declines the question may each accept or reject the hypothesis on its own historical merits. The observations that would refute it are set out in Section 8.

The argument proceeds in six steps. Section 2 states the condition on which self-organizing systems depend and draws from it a conclusion narrower than is usually drawn: the analogy from distributed natural regulation leaves the dispensability of human centers unestablished, and its failure leaves their necessity equally unestablished; what survives the comparison is constraint, while the identity of the promulgating authority remains variable. Section 3 treats concentration as an instrument of finite rationality and characterizes provisional shared belief as infrastructure for inquiry. Section 4 states the second obstacle and names its object, trans-subjectivity, distinguishing the position from whatever occupies it. Section 5 makes the ontological commitment on which the paper turns, defining relation as constraint and drawing the consequences for how the history of transcendence may be narrated. Section 6 accounts for reification and proposes a criterion distinguishing a carrier that bears trans-subjectivity from

one that has appropriated it. Section 7 sets out two competing hypotheses about the persistence of concentration and marks the limit of what the argument establishes. Section 8 states the consequences of the account, a boundary it must observe, the observations that would refute the hypothesis, and its limits.

2 EXOGENOUS CONSTRAINT IN SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS

This section examines the class of systems ordinarily adduced to show that regulation proceeds without a concentrated authority, and identifies the condition on which their operation depends. Its objective is to determine what may be carried across from such systems to the case of a human community. It proceeds in three steps: the preconditions of local-rule regulation, together with a structural definition of the lawgiver; the epistemic position of a human community with respect to those preconditions; and the element of the distributed picture that survives the comparison. The method is conceptual analysis of a standard model in neuroscience, joined to a classical argument in epistemology.

2.1 *The Preconditions of Local-Rule Regulation*

Local-rule regulation of the kind exhibited by spike-timing-dependent plasticity operates under conditions that the regulating process itself does not produce. Each element must respond to its inputs in a determinate way. The modification of a connection must depend on the timing of activity according to a determinate function. The temporal scale of that dependence must be fixed. All elements must share these features, since a population whose members modified their connections by mutually incompatible rules would organize nothing. Such conditions are what the process runs on, and they stand outside its outcomes.

Definition 2.1. (Lawgiver). *A lawgiver, in the sense used here, is whatever fixes the local rules of a system while standing outside their application, such that the elements obeying those rules lack the standing to revise them. The notion is structural, and it carries no theological or agential commitment: evolutionary and physical history is a lawgiver in this sense, as is the designer of a model, and the two are alike in the respect that matters here, namely that the rule is exogenous to the process adduced as evidence of self-organization.*

Proposition 2.2. (Presupposed nomos). *Every system ordinarily adduced to show that regulation proceeds without a concentrated authority presupposes a lawgiver in the above sense. The absence of a central controller in such a system is therefore compatible with, and in the observed cases accompanied by, an exogenous determination of the constraints under which the system operates.*

The proposition constitutes no criticism of the neural case or of complexity theory. Within its own domain the observation of centerless regulation is exact, and the models exhibiting

it are among the more successful in the sciences. The proposition concerns what may be carried from that domain to another. Where the neural case is offered as evidence that human communities could dispense with central regulation, it silently supplies the analogy with a lawgiver, and the conclusion is then drawn in a setting that contains one.

2.2 *The Epistemic Position of a Human Community*

A human community stands to the constraints under which it lives in a position that differs from that of the elements of a self-organizing system in three respects. It has no part in fixing the rules of the world it inhabits. It has no access to whatever does fix them. And by the argument of the first *Treatise* it holds whatever regularities it has inferred under an uncertainty that further experience leaves in place (Hume, 1739). The elements of a neural population occupy the enviable position of obeying a rule simply given to them. The members of a human community generate the constraints under which they will live, do so with no external source against which to check them, and remain liable throughout to discover that they were mistaken.

The consequence for institutions runs contrary to the one usually drawn. Where a community must fix its own constraints under conditions in which no fixing can be final, some mechanism for provisionally settling what shall be treated as binding belongs to the requirements of its situation. Concentration, read in this way, appears in the first instance as an instrument of epistemic stabilization under finitude, whatever else it may become; Section 6 treats how it becomes something else.

Claim 2.3. (Blocked inference). *The observation that natural systems regulate themselves without a concentrated authority leaves unlicensed the conclusion that human communities could do likewise, since the observation is drawn from systems whose constraints are exogenously fixed, and human communities are precisely those whose constraints are generated from within. The inference fails on account of a difference in what supplies the rule, and the mechanisms remain as similar as they appeared.*

Two cautions bound the claim, and both matter to what follows. First, the claim is negative in force. It blocks one argument for the dispensability of concentration and leaves the necessity of concentration unestablished, and no such conclusion is drawn here. A community may yet devise mechanisms that stabilize belief provisionally while distributing the power to do so, and Section 7 treats that possibility as live. Second, the biological lawgiver is impersonal, and nothing in the argument requires otherwise. The point is that the elements of the population had no part in fixing what they obey and possess no standing to revise it; and it is the second half of that conjunction, revisability, that carries the analytical weight later on.

2.3 Constraint as the Invariant of Distributed Regulation

The comparison between distributed natural regulation and human governance leaves one element of the distributed picture intact and removes another. What it removes is the suggestion that a distributed arrangement operates without a fixed common rule. Spike-timing-dependent plasticity works because every element shares a grammar: the same signalling event, the same temporal metric, the same biochemistry. Where the shared grammar is withdrawn, the local rule coordinates nothing, and a population whose members each modified their connections by a private function would drift. Distribution is a fact about where the regulating mechanism sits, and it leaves untouched what the mechanism runs on.

What survives intact is the separation of two matters ordinarily conflated. That a system requires shared constraints leaves open whether it requires a distinguished party to promulgate them. The neural case demonstrates that separation cleanly, and the demonstration stands unaffected by the lawgiver problem, which concerns the origin of the constraints and leaves the question of a promulgator aside.

Claim 2.4. (Constraint as the invariant). *The invariant of generative systems is constraint, and authority is variable. Any system in which generation occurs is constrained, by a shared grammar, a metric, or a set of admissible operations, and generation free of constraint is observed at no scale. The party that promulgates and revises constraints varies historically and may in principle be concentrated or distributed. The future of governance may accordingly cease to be centralized; it will remain constrained.*

The reframing that follows from this claim governs the remainder of the paper. A question about the fate of concentration asks after an occupant. The question available for investigation is the conditional one: under what conditions does the regulation of constraints take a concentrated form, and under what conditions a distributed one? That question admits different answers at different scales, complexities and historical moments, and presumes no single answer for all of them.

3 FINITE RATIONALITY AND THE PROVISIONAL COORDINATION OF BELIEF

A community that must fix its own constraints without external warrant requires some means of settling provisionally what shall be treated as binding. This section characterizes that operation and states its standing within an account of inquiry. Its objective is to establish that provisionally shared belief functions as infrastructure for continued inquiry, and its structure is twofold: the first part examines what the relevant institutions actually claim for themselves, and the second exhibits the same structure in a register far removed from institutions, namely the formulae of ordinary language. The method is the analysis of what such institutions and formulae assert, taken at face value.

3.1 Coordination in Advance of Certainty

Communities act in advance of the settlement of the questions on which they act, and their institutions are legible in that light. The claims such institutions make for themselves are modest and are worth taking literally. Academic peer review asserts that a reviewed paper has met a standard of scrutiny the community currently treats as adequate, and leaves the truth of the paper open. A court asserts that an accepted procedure has been followed and that the matter is settled for the present, and asserts nothing about correspondence between its finding and what occurred. A vote asserts the distribution of preferences and leaves the correctness of the majority open. Air traffic control claims workability, and a clinical guideline announces itself as the current best available basis for action. In each case the claim is to a warrant for acting together in advance of truth.

The classical name for the faculty exercised here is practical reason, as distinguished from theoretical reason (Aristotle, 1985, Bk. VI): judgment as to what is to be done in circumstances that resist demonstration, subject to revision as the circumstances or the evidence change. Its distinguishing feature is that in the domains where it operates, waiting for demonstration is itself a decision, and commonly a worse one.

Claim 3.1. (Provisional belief as infrastructure). *Shared belief functions as the temporary infrastructure that makes continued inquiry possible, and it stands at some distance from the endpoint of inquiry. What a community requires in order to continue generating is that enough of its beliefs be jointly held for long enough to be acted upon, and that the arrangement holding them retain the capacity for revision. An institution that is imperfect and revisable is, on this reading, the only kind of institution the epistemic position described in Section 2 permits, and it stands at a distance from a compromised approximation to one that is correct and final.*

Claim 3.2. (The cost of pure reason). *A community that would act only on constraints it could demonstrate would fail to act, and a history composed of such communities would fail to develop. The demand for unlimited rationality is therefore incompatible with the demand for practical wisdom, since the first forbids what the second requires, namely provisional commitment under acknowledged uncertainty.*

3.2 Practical Coordination in Ordinary Language

Formulae whose function is to suspend adjudication so that a relation may continue are a common resource of ordinary language, and their existence shows the structure just described to operate well outside formal institutions. Mandarin carries a well-worn set of them: *da guonian de*, “it is the new year”; *lai dou lai le*, “we have come all this way already”; *dou bu rongyi*, “no one has it easy.” Each would fail immediately as an argument, and each is deployed at exactly the point where pressing the question of who is right threatens to break the relation. Each substitutes deferral for adjudication. The judgment exercised concerns the conditions of con-

tinuation: that the relation be maintained now, and that interpretation resume later, when it can be borne.

These formulae are cited as evidence rather than as ornament. They show that provisional settlement in the service of continued generation, with revision deferred and left available, is a common resource of social life, exercised by speakers who have never framed it as a problem in epistemology. A sociology of practical wisdom would take such phenomena as its subject and would ask how a community forms judgments stable enough for generation to continue while retaining the capacity to correct them. The present paper stands within that programme without undertaking it.

4 TRANS-SUBJECTIVITY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT

This section supplies the support for Hypothesis 1.1, which states a second condition on the arrangements by which a community holds its constraints, bearing on the constitution of subjects, where Section 3 bore on the state of their knowledge. Its objective is to distinguish a structural position, here named trans-subjectivity, from whatever historically occupies it, and thereby to separate two questions that disputes about the fate of concentration commonly conflate. It proceeds in two parts: the first assembles the convergent testimony of otherwise incompatible traditions concerning the external confirmation of subjecthood; the second identifies the question that the distinction between position and occupant exposes. The method is the comparison of traditions that agree in their finding while differing in their vocabulary and their commitments.

4.1 *The External Confirmation of Subjecthood*

The proposition that the standing of a subject arrives from a source beyond the subject enjoys an unusually broad base of support and an unusually varied vocabulary. Feuerbach reads the divine as the projection of human essence, which amounts to the claim that a community produced what it required to be seen by (Feuerbach, 1841). Durkheim identifies social facts that are the creation of no individual and constrain every individual, and locates in collective life the source of categories that the individual receives as given (Durkheim, 1912). Otto describes the experience of the holy as fundamentally the experience of standing before something (Otto, 1917); Buber holds that one becomes an “I” in being addressed (Buber, 1923); Levinas makes the other’s face the term through which the subject is constituted as answerable (Levinas, 1961). Lacan formalizes the position as such, as a locus of the symbolic order to which the subject’s speech is addressed and from which its standing is received (Lacan, 1977). These traditions differ about nearly everything else, and they converge on the finding that the subject’s confirmation arrives from elsewhere.

What follows for the present argument is structural, concerning a position, and it leaves

psychological claims about need aside. Where the standing of a subject and the bindingness of a norm require a source exceeding any particular party, a community that withdraws one such source while providing no other has left a position vacant. Vacancies of this kind are seldom observed to persist. The withdrawal of a deity was followed, in the modern period, by the elevation of reason, of history, of the nation, of the market and of the scientific community, each of which has at various times been asked to underwrite what was formerly underwritten elsewhere (Nietzsche, 1882).

Definition 4.1. (Trans-subjectivity). *Trans-subjectivity is the standing a constraint has when it is undergone as exceeding the arbitrariness of any single subject, that is, as something to which all the parties are answerable, including whoever proposed it. It is a property of how a constraint is held within a set of relations, and it is a property of no entity.*

Claim 4.2. (The position and its occupants). *The requirement of trans-subjectivity and the identity of whatever supplies it are distinct questions, and most disputes about the fate of concentration conflate them. That the position resists remaining vacant is consistent with a wide range of occupants, so that the disappearance of any particular occupant is evidence about that occupant alone. Correspondingly, an argument that some concentrated carrier is dispensable settles the general question only once it says what will occupy the position.*

4.2 The Acceptance of a Generated Constraint

The distinction between the trans-subjective position and its occupants exposes a question that studies of norm formation seldom pose, concerning the terms on which an emergent constraint acquires a standing beyond the party that proposed it. A considerable literature addresses how norms emerge, whether from repeated interaction, from bargaining, from the sedimentation of practice, or from institutional design. Much less is said about the acceptance of an emergent norm as binding. The two questions come apart. A rule may be fully explained in its genesis and remain, for those subject to it, merely somebody's rule, known to have issued from a party and complied with so far as that party can enforce it.

The difference between a rule so held and a rule held as binding is trans-subjectivity in the sense defined above, and the durability of an arrangement turns on it. The remainder of the paper takes up that difference: the terms on which a generated constraint acquires, or fails to acquire, a standing that no party owns.

5 RELATION AS HISTORICAL CONSTRAINT

This section states the ontological commitment on which the argument rests and draws its consequences for the narration of the history of transcendence. Its objective is twofold: to define the central term of the framework in a way that excludes the readings most likely to

be imported into it, and to establish that the historical material assembled in Section 4 must be told as a series of carriers. It proceeds in three parts: the definition and its exclusions; the historical carriers of trans-subjectivity; and the standing of the term *relational divinity* within the account. The method is definitional analysis followed by the application of the definition to the account's own vocabulary.

5.1 *The Definition of Relation and Its Exclusions*

The framework's central term is defined as follows.

Definition 5.1. (Relation). *A relation is the constraint under which generation unfolds within a historical process: that which renders some continuations possible and others impossible, for the parties whose activity is so constrained.*

The definition excludes several readings that the word ordinarily invites. A relation so defined stands apart from a link between two antecedently given objects, from an edge of a graph, from a channel of interaction, and from the network these compose. A consequence follows for what can be exhibited. Asked to display a relation, one may display the parties, their activity, the regularities in that activity and the traces it leaves, while the constraint itself remains outside the class of things that can be indicated, legible only in what it renders possible and impossible. The consequence follows from the definition, and much of what follows depends on taking it seriously.

The definition also marks the distance between the present framework and neighbouring relational ontologies. Relational sociology and actor-network theory hold, in their various idioms, that entities are constituted through their relations and that the world is best described as a network in which no term is prior to its connections. The commitment here is more specific. Its content is that constraints under which generation proceeds crystallize historically into carriers, that the carriers come to be taken for the constraints, and that the constraints outlast their carriers and reappear in others. A network ontology describes a state of the world; the account offered here describes a recurring historical operation, and thereby carries a risk of refutation that a claim of universal connection does not.

5.2 *Historical Carriers of Trans-Subjectivity*

An account of transcendence organized around historical succession invites completion by a third term. Trans-subjectivity was located first in a creator and a cosmic order; then, in the modern period, in a symbolic order and the institutions instantiating it, among them law, the nation, science, human rights and the market; and one is invited to complete the sequence by naming what comes third, and to answer: relation. That completion is a mistake, and the identification of its source is the pivot of this paper.

Under the definition given above, relation stands outside the class of candidates for the position. A candidate must be a thing capable of occupying it. To name relation as the successor to God and to the symbol is to treat relation as an entity of the same category as a deity and a symbolic order, differing in diffuseness alone, which is precisely the reification the account exists to diagnose, performed by the account itself, at its conclusion, upon its own central term. A framework that ends by installing its primitive in the vacated seat has filled the seat and left it unexplained.

The sequence therefore requires a different form. It records a series of *carriers*: historical forms, each of which bore for a time a portion of the constraints under which a community's generation proceeded, and each of which received what it bore. A deity carried; a symbolic order carries; a state, a currency, a scientific community, a commons arrangement and conceivably an artificial system carry. What is powerful is what the state, for a period, carries. The constraint under which the generation of that community proceeds has been at work throughout, and the sequence records the changing forms in which it has been borne, leaving unrecorded any progression toward its nature.

Claim 5.2. (Transcendence as a mode of undergoing). *Should Hypothesis 1.3 hold, transcendence admits description as the manner in which a generative constraint is undergone: as belonging to no party, as standing at no one's disposal, and as binding upon all, including whoever proposed it. What the theological tradition records under the name of divinity would then include a phenomenon of that kind, described in the vocabulary of an entity. The claim is a consequence of the hypothesis and shares its standing; it settles nothing about what else the tradition may be recording.*

5.3 The Auxiliary Status of the Term Relational Divinity

The term *relational divinity* occupies a particular and limited place in the account, and stating that place is a condition of the term's usefulness.

Claim 5.3. (The auxiliary status of relational divinity). *Relational divinity is an auxiliary term. It is introduced to make visible that the source of trans-subjectivity belongs to no party, whether a deity, a state, a science, a commons, or the noun "relation" itself, and it is discharged once that has been seen. It designates nothing, and were it treated as designating something, the resulting position would be indistinguishable from the ones it was introduced to displace.*

The device is familiar elsewhere. A construction line is drawn to make a proof possible and forms no part of what the proof asserts; a ladder is climbed and then, on one famous account of philosophical elucidation, thrown away (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.54). The term used here is of that kind. The seriousness of the requirement deserves emphasis, since the temptation to violate it is considerable and the violation is difficult to detect. An author who has argued at

length that trans-subjectivity belongs to no entity, and who then finds “the relational” appearing in his own prose as that which grants, permits, requires or authorizes, has reinstated the entity within the vocabulary of its refusal.

6 REIFICATION AND THE CRITERION OF OPEN REVISION

This section accounts for the persistence with which generative constraints are identified with the institutions carrying them, and proposes a criterion by which two relations between a carrier and its constraint may be distinguished. Its objective is to replace a question about concentration with a question that admits examination case by case. It proceeds in three parts: the conditions favouring reification; the distinction between carrying and appropriating, stated as a definition and a proposition; and the application of the criterion to distributed arrangements, which supplies the less expected half of its content. The method is functional analysis of reification followed by the construction of a criterion and its testing against cases that lie outside the criterion’s expected range.

6.1 *Conditions Favouring the Reification of Constraints*

Reification, in the sense used here, is the treatment of a historically generated constraint as a thing existing independently of the process generating it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Two features of the situation of a finite community render it close to inevitable.

The first is that the constraint resists exhibition. A community obliged to coordinate upon constraints it cannot indicate is awkwardly placed, and identifying the constraint with something indicable, whether a text, an office, a person or an institution, renders it addressable. One may then appeal to it, teach it, invoke it, and be shown to have violated it. Reification is in this respect the ordinary means by which a constraint becomes usable by finite parties.

The second is that a carrier confers stability. A constraint identified with a durable institution outlasts the memories and enthusiasms of those who hold it and binds parties who were absent when it was formed. Both features are advantages, and both are purchased at a characteristic cost.

6.2 *Carrying and Appropriating as Two Relations of a Carrier to Its Constraint*

The cost appears where the carrier comes to present itself as the source of what it carries. So long as an institution is understood to bear a constraint that the relations of the community generate, the institution remains answerable to those relations, and what it bears remains open to contest by them. Where the institution is taken to be the source, the direction of answerability reverses: the relations become answerable to the institution, and revision of the constraint passes into the hands of the carrier. At that point, and independently of concentration as such, an arrangement becomes a center in the pejorative sense.

Definition 6.1. (Carrying and appropriating). *A carrier bears trans-subjectivity while it holds a constraint that remains answerable to the relations generating it. It has appropriated trans-subjectivity once it holds a constraint whose revision it alone controls, so that the standing of the constraint derives from the carrier, in place of the carrier's standing deriving from the constraint.*

Proposition 6.2. (The criterion of open revision). *Whether a carrier bears or appropriates turns on whether the path of revision of the constraint it carries remains open to the relations generating that constraint, and it turns only incidentally on whether regulation is concentrated or distributed. A concentrated arrangement whose constraints may be contested, amended and withdrawn by those subject to them bears; a distributed arrangement whose outcomes are received as beyond appeal appropriates.*

6.3 Application of the Criterion to Distributed Arrangements

The second half of the proposition carries the greater analytical yield, being the less expected. Distribution operates as a remedy only incidentally, and several distributed arrangements rank among the more effective appropriators available. A market whose verdicts are received as facts of nature, and thereby detached from the revisable arrangement that produces them, has appropriated in exactly the sense defined. So has a consensus that a participant may contest only by ceasing to be a participant. So has an automated system whose determinations stand beyond appeal because no party is positioned to say how they were reached. In each case the constraint has ceased to be answerable to the relations generating it, and the vacancy of any distinguished seat leaves that fact untouched.

Two clarifications keep the criterion to its proper size. It is a criterion for one distinction and leaves legitimacy in general open: an arrangement may satisfy it and remain objectionable on other grounds entirely, and the further considerations that would be required lie outside this paper. And it is stated as a matter of degree. Revision paths are seldom wholly open or wholly closed, and the claim is that the extent of their openness is the variable on which the distinction between bearing and appropriating turns, and that this variable admits examination in a given case in a way that the question of concentration does not.

7 COMPETING HYPOTHESES ON THE PERSISTENCE OF CONCENTRATION

This section states two hypotheses concerning the future of concentrated carriers and assembles the considerations bearing on each. Its objective is to mark the limit of what the foregoing argument establishes, which extends to the reposing of the question and stops short of its answer. It proceeds by stating each hypothesis in a form that permits it to be tested, entering two considerations that temper enthusiasm for the second, and indicating the kind of evidence

that would bear on the choice. The method is the explicit statement of alternatives that the argument leaves open.

Hypothesis 7.1. (Permanent concentration). *Human communities permanently require a concentrated occupant of the trans-subjective position. Finite rationality, the cognitive cost of holding a constraint that resists exhibition, and whatever in the constitution of subjects renders confirmation from a distinguished source more satisfying than confirmation from peers, jointly ensure that any distributed arrangement will be re-concentrated. On this hypothesis concentration is a standing requirement, and the vacancies opened by the withdrawal of one occupant will be filled by another, whether or not the successor is an improvement.*

Hypothesis 7.2. (Concentration as one realization). *What human communities require is a process that continually produces trans-subjectivity, and concentration is one historical realization of that requirement, alongside commons arrangements, open review, distributed adjudication and their successors. On this hypothesis the position remains necessary while its concentration becomes optional, and the practical question becomes which arrangements generate constraints that are undergone as binding while leaving their revision open to those subject to them.*

This paper leaves the choice between Hypotheses 7.1 and 7.2 open, and the state of the evidence permits no more. Two considerations temper enthusiasm for the second. The first is that Hypothesis 7.2 might hold in principle and fail in practice: trans-subjectivity may well be producible by distributed relational processes while human beings re-concentrate it, reliably and quickly, because a source that can be named and addressed is easier to hold than one that resists exhibition. Were that so, the appropriate object of study would be the rate and manner of reconstitution, and the abolition of concentrated carriers would fall away as an object of study. The second consideration is the argument of Section 2, which cuts in both directions: a community that must fix its own constraints without external warrant has reason to concentrate that fixing, and the reason retains its force once concentration has been shown to be a historical form.

Evidence bearing on the choice would concern carriers in the first instance: how long distributed arrangements sustain constraints that are undergone as binding, what the observable markers of appropriation are, and whether the reconstitution of a concentrated carrier follows a regular course. The criterion of Section 6 is offered partly as a step toward rendering such questions askable.

8 IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITS OF THE ACCOUNT

This closing section states what follows from the account for the analysis of institutions, marks a boundary the account is obliged to observe on pain of collapsing into a position it rejects,

gives the observations that would refute Hypothesis 1.3, enters two informal extensions of the account, and sets out the limits under which the whole should be read. It proceeds in six parts, in that order, and states in each case what would count as a failure of the argument.

8.1 Consequences for the Analysis of Institutions

The account carries three consequences for the way the fate of institutions is discussed. The first is that the disappearance of a particular carrier is evidence about that carrier alone, so that arguments to the effect that a given institution is withering leave the requirement it carried untouched. The second is that a proposal to distribute a function leaves the question of appropriation open and may aggravate it, since a distributed appropriation is harder to identify and offers no office at which to be contested. The third is that the design question changes shape: it becomes the question of how the path of revision of a constraint may be kept open to the relations generating it while the constraint retains stability enough for generation to proceed. That is a question about arrangements, and it admits examination case by case.

8.2 The Boundary Between Description and Justification

The framework within which this paper is written treats generation as its central phenomenon, and that commitment creates a specific hazard at the point where the criterion of Section 6 is applied. It would be easy, and it would be an error, to argue that relational transcendence is to be preferred on the ground that it is more generative, that open revision produces more, and that its productivity is what recommends it. The argument is refused here. Once generativity is installed as an end, the reasoning becomes available to anything that can claim to serve it, including the appropriation of a constraint on the ground that the appropriator will generate more with it. That generation occurs under certain conditions is an observation; that it ought to be maximized is a norm, and the present account supplies no such norm. The criterion of Section 6 is offered as a distinction and withheld as an imperative, and the distance between the two is maintained deliberately, since the vocabulary of the framework makes it easy to lose.

8.3 Observations That Would Refute the Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1.3 holds that trans-subjective generative constraints recur across history through a succession of carriers, and that the forms called divinity are among those in which such constraints have been borne. A hypothesis confirmed by every carrier indifferently would be empty, and would reproduce at the level of history the vacuity that Section 5 attributes to the claim that all things are connected. Three classes of observation would tell against it, and each is available to historical and ethnographic study.

The first concerns succession. Where a carrier is withdrawn and the constraint it held disappears from the subsequent conduct of the community without reconstitution elsewhere, the

hypothesis of recurrence loses its principal support; the interesting cases are those in which a religious or institutional order has collapsed and generation continued. The second concerns sufficiency, and it bears on Hypothesis 1.1 as well. A community that sustains generation over a long period while holding its constraints openly as the arrangements of particular parties, appealing to nothing held as exceeding those parties, would show trans-subjectivity to be dispensable and the phenomenon under discussion to be local to certain traditions. The third concerns commonality. Where the succession of carriers within a single community exhibits no constraint held in common across its members, so that each carrier organized a wholly different set of possibilities, the succession would be a sequence of unrelated regimes, and the hypothesis would have identified a resemblance where there is only a series.

Each of the three is stated so that a negative finding would count. Their satisfaction supports the hypothesis, and confirmation of that kind establishes considerably less than refutation would destroy, which is the ordinary asymmetry and is accepted here.

8.4 *The Definition of Relation at the Scale of History*

The definition given in Section 5 admits an extension whose interest exceeds what this paper establishes, and it is entered here as an informal remark, outside the claims of the account and outside the hypotheses offered for testing.

A relation was defined as the constraint under which generation unfolds within a historical process. Read at the scale of a particular set of parties, the definition picks out what renders some continuations available to them and others unavailable. Read at the scale of a historical process taken as a whole, the same words pick out something else: the conditions under which that process continues to generate at all. The extension suggests a redescription of what the theological vocabulary may have been tracking, in which divinity names the conditions under which history continues to generate itself, and stands at some distance from a being situated beyond the world. On such a reading, what has been called relational divinity would be relation itself considered diachronically, at the scale of the whole in place of the locality, and its auxiliary status would remain exactly as Section 5 describes it: the extension supplies a further use for a term still marked for discharge.

Two hazards attend the extension, and both are reasons for its informal standing. The first is the hazard marked in Section 8 above: a condition of continued generation, once named as divine, acquires an evaluative charge that the framework declines to confer, and the redescription would then stand one step from the proposition that whatever sustains generation is thereby sanctioned. The second hazard is internal to this paper. An appropriating carrier may sustain generation over a long period, and a formulation identifying divinity with the conditions of continued generation would count such a carrier among the divine, in contradiction with the criterion of Section 6. A form of the extension that survives both hazards would say that the theological tradition tracked conditions of this kind, while leaving open whether any

particular arrangement that succeeds in sustaining generation deserves the name. Whether such a form can be stated with enough precision to be worth stating is left here as a question.

8.5 The Withering-Away Thesis in the Terms of the Account

A second informal extension concerns a thesis with which the question of this paper has an obvious affinity, and it is entered with the same standing as the first. Engels holds that the state, having lost the function that called it into being, ceases to be abolished and comes instead to die out, its administration of persons giving way to an administration of things (Engels, 1878). The debate on the thesis has been conducted largely in economic and political terms, concerning class antagonism, coercion and the administrative residue.

The account offered here supplies a further condition on the thesis, and thereby a further respect in which it might be tested. On Hypothesis 1.1, the state is among the occupants of the place upon which subjecthood is witnessed, and its disappearance would leave that place vacant. The withering of the state is therefore possible on the present account, and it is conditional: it requires, beyond the conditions the thesis itself specifies, that the place be otherwise occupied. Where it remains vacant, the observed course is reoccupation, and the historical record of communities that have pursued the thesis is instructive in this respect, since the carriers that arose in these cases, whether a party, a leader, or history itself understood as an arbiter, were considerable ones. A theory of the state's disappearance that says nothing about the trans-subjective function of the state has accordingly specified a part of its own conditions.

What might occupy the place admits a formulation, and the formulation requires care of a kind Section 5 has already imposed. To say that relation occupies the vacated place would install the framework's own primitive as a successor entity, which is the error diagnosed throughout. The available formulation is Hypothesis 7.2: the place may be occupied by a process, in which trans-subjectivity is continually generated within relations that hold their constraints open to revision by the parties subject to them. The withering-away thesis, read in these terms, becomes an instance of that hypothesis rather than an independent proposition, and it inherits the hypothesis's undecided standing along with the considerations of Section 7 that temper it.

A final observation returns the extension to the criterion of Section 6. On the present account the disappearance of the state is a question about one carrier, and the question that bears on the parties concerned is whether the constraints under which they live remain open to revision by them. A successor arrangement that appropriates, however distributed its form and however thoroughly the state has withered, has left that question answered in the same way as before.

8.6 *Limits of the Account and Further Work*

The account rests on claims that could be wrong, several of them load-bearing. The lawgiver argument is negative in force, as noted in Section 2, and a reader who grants it is entitled to observe that it establishes considerably less than the confidence with which the analogy from complexity is ordinarily asserted, and less than would be required to justify any particular institution. The claim that the subject's confirmation arrives from beyond the subject rests here on convergence among traditions, with evidence still to be supplied, and convergence among traditions is compatible with their sharing an error. The criterion of open revision awaits an operational form that this paper leaves unsupplied: what counts as a path of revision, how openness is to be assessed, and by whom, are questions on which a good deal turns and on which nothing has been settled here. The historical carriers named are illustrative and their treatment is thin; a serious historical study might well find the succession less orderly than the exposition suggests, and the account would then require revision in place of defence.

A final limit concerns the paper's own vocabulary. The term *divinity* appears in the title of a paper arguing that transcendence is a mode of undergoing a constraint, and the tension is deliberate: the term names the phenomenon in the language in which it has been most fully recorded, and the argument is that the phenomenon has been misdescribed while remaining real. An auxiliary term is nonetheless only as good as the discipline of the person using it, and a reader who finds the term performing work here that the argument forbids it should conclude that the argument has failed at the point of its own application, and should say so.

A note on method. The argument is conceptual and has been left in prose. Two formal treatments suggest themselves, and both are left to further work. The first would represent the revision path of a constraint explicitly, as a constraint together with the set of parties competent to amend it and the conditions under which amendment occurs, which would give the criterion of Section 6 an operational form and render appropriation a determinate property of an arrangement, assessable independently of any reader's judgment. The second would model the reconstitution of concentrated carriers as a dynamical process, in which the tendency of a distributed arrangement toward re-concentration could be stated as a property of its dynamics, where the present account asserts a psychological disposition of its participants. Both are worth doing, and both would test claims that are here argued alone.

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