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Slouching Toward Gautama

Towards a Buddhist Politics of Freedom

Zach Dorfman

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All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the 'objects' of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves."

— William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

There is a central teaching in certain schools of Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics that all phenomena are *shunya*, or empty of inherent existence. Things only exist in their relation to one another, through the myriad arising and cessation of causes and conditions. Subject and object, self and other, the one and the many: all becoming simultaneously through some spontaneous irruption. Life, which presents itself as so dense — like some gossamer web of being, solid from a distance — is in fact far more delicate than we credit it to be. Causes beget causes and what we thought we knew, what we *knew* we knew, recedes into a distant mental space that nevertheless maintains an aura of familiarity, like the bedrooms of our infancy. This place is all silhouettes and shadows, lacking one

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piece of recognizable furniture, but it nevertheless has the capacity to absorb us completely.

While such terrible complexity underlies even the most simplest-seeming of objects, and we may not be able to identify the essential or inherent qualities or causes of any given phenomena, they nevertheless appear to us as solid, real “things.” The central teaching of this school of philosophy is also its central paradox: phenomena arise interdependently, but they are empty. Emptiness, or *shunyata*, characterizes all objects, all beings, and all processes. Where we see stability, there is only unyielding flux. The essence of phenomena is to have no essence at all, except the provisional meanings that we individually and collectively ascribe to them: there is no “there” there. Seemingly impregnable from the outside, objects cannot withstand analysis. They disappear in the web of their own relations. Our most coveted possessions, spaces we’ve furtively made our own, the ideas of people we’ve loved and lusted after, all dissolve to the touch. This fact doesn’t make these mental objects any less real, or their emotional force any less intense. It just means we have to take these ideal types for what they are, and, secure in the fact that they are fleeting — transitory — accept that we are no different.

But there is another layer to this paradox. Straining for an unattainable mental object, we end up preserving the world as it is. Sometimes a cup is just a cup.

Simple. Perfect. The fact that objects are on one level essentially unknowable doesn’t mean phenomena can’t (or shouldn’t) be broken down and analyzed according to their aesthetic, sociological, technical, religious, psychological, political, biological, linguistic, chemical, philosophical, or economic aspects (among many others). It’s just impossible to reduce them solely to one of these ways of seeing, or ultimately privilege one of these modes of observation over another. Truth and falsity remain valid and necessary categories for describing our experiences; a pear is not a Volkswagen, the Sears tower is not Mao Tse-tung. The fact that these associa-

tions sound absurd reflects the extent to which our knowledge of the world is both shared and reflexive, before our critical faculties do violence to this preexisting harmony and the conceptual scar tissue forms. Thus reality is, in this sense, exactly as we perceive it, as it presents itself to us as a mental object, but also radically unknowable. But again, just because objects are unknowable *at their core* does not mean that relative statements about, say, the position and movement of celestial bodies or the relationship between monetary policy and inflation are necessarily incoherent. The concept of emptiness (*shunyata*) does not fuel the fire of some “Eastern”-flavored obscurantist doctrine.

This essay is an attempt to bridge the gap between this theory about the nature of phenomena — that they are empty, yet arise interdependently — and what this knowledge means for our shared world, especially the political sphere. Because of the difficulty of enunciating a full-blown Buddhist theory of politics (assuming this could even exist in the singular), my aim is to create a pathway, a sketch of what this political consciousness might look like, given Buddhism’s unique arguments about the nature of reality and the self. To do this, a little more must be said about these arguments themselves.

Since according to the idea of emptiness nothing possesses any essential, unchanging identity, the doctrine challenges some basic theological principles that foreground a great deal of human striving. Eternal damnation or eternal reward: these do not matter, because, “eternal” is a concept of our own invention, and one, notably, that is not borne out in our experience of the world.¹ Alas, if we accept the idea that phenomena exist only in their relation to other phenomena, the idea of an eternally existing, omnipotent Creator-God becomes a necessary casualty.

¹ How Buddhism still finds a way to posit a metaphysical enforcement mechanism for morality through the action-driven cycle of rebirths known as the karma-*samsara* complex is a different and more troublesome matter altogether.

From a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, the basic critique of a Creator-God usually proceeds along the following lines. Say you assume the existence of an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, Creator-God. If he were eternal he would be utterly causeless, always existing, creating but never created, an unmoved mover. He would be *beyond* causation, prior and posterior to it. But if he were in fact beyond causation, he would be unable to himself cause anything, because only beings or objects with causal power can affect other like objects. To exist beyond causality, then, most likely means to not exist at all. Of course, it is possible that a quasi-impotent God could abide outside the realm of human perception, and be granted a sort of “permanent observer” status, viewing the goings-on of the cosmos from afar.² I doubt, though, that most believers from within the monotheistic tradition would find this idea of God accurate or desirable. A God who cannot provide wish fulfillment is probably not a God worth worshiping.

In the emptiness tradition the notion of “the eternal” is discarded as incoherent, but so is the tempting proposition that because things do not exist perpetually and independently of one another, nothing “really” exists. The doctrine’s proponents are always quick to emphasize that the idea that all phenomena are empty does not serve as a sophisticated license for nihilism. At its best, the idea of emptiness can act as a corrective of sorts, helping to soften a fundamentally human tendency: the imposition of order and stability upon life’s chaotic undertow. That is to say, it not only explodes the idea that there is some kind of intangible yet essential property to any given object or being — the eternal soul, the Godhead, Atman-Brahman, all the different essentialist footnotes to Plato — but also emphasizes that the mundane properties that we ascribe to ourselves are ultimately illusory.

² God, according to another well-known skeptical philosopher, would therefore be “dead.”

took this view, and interpreted Buddhism in this way approvingly), or as an ascetic, world-denying religious tradition, separate and removed from the pure, rational domain of philosophy proper. It is neither. In a way, denying the ultimate reality of the self is among the most life-affirming of philosophies. In admitting that we are not the axis upon which the rest of the world revolves, we free ourselves to the world. We become nothing more — but nothing less — than everything else. Disintegrating as that vision may be, it is also beautiful, because our individual and collective possibilities become truly endless. Because objects are empty, things can arise. Anything can arise.

The question becomes what kind of world we wish to create. The Indo-Tibetan Prasangika Madhyamika school of philosophy, one of the most important emptiness traditions within Buddhism, only employs the *via negativa* mode of interrogation to uncover the nature of phenomena. In other words, they affirm only through negation. They make no positive statements, but purportedly clear away the underbrush of the mind through examining what they know *not* to be true. Through this process they claim to achieve a certain amount of mental clarity about their own nature and the world's true state of being. We must of course stand *for* things, and cannot only define the ideal political arrangement through what we consider deficient. But this process of “affirmation through negation” is helpful and perhaps necessary when trying to sketch the ideal relationship between man and state, oneself and others, and our own divided selves. Through this process of continuously breaking down and building up our psychological, social, and political worlds, we may discover some tensions or truths previously eclipsed by others, and thus better accept and understand the unity-in-diversity that underlies the tremendously discordant aspects of human life. Perhaps this refined understanding will make us suffer less, and strive toward more. Perhaps it will make us build something better, together.

Initially, this latter fact would seem to be the easier one with which to come to terms. After all, we find it relatively intuitive that we are not the person we were ten years ago, and that we will be very different creatures a decade from now. The fact that this is self-evident is itself puzzling: we conceive of ourselves as somehow exterior to our own experience of the world. But not in our daily life — this sense of disassociation would be nightmarish, and we rightly view it as pathological. There is a certain “wholeness” to experience that is absolutely fundamental to human life (and perhaps other sentient life as well). Time has to be stretched out — it has to feel like a discrete entity — for us to “look back” on it and see ourselves as an object, or at least as a different, somewhat foreign, subject. The notion that we possess multiple selves over a lifetime, but nevertheless maintain an abiding, residual center to our being is sometimes called the idea of the “transitory composite” in Buddhism. In the emptiness tradition, the ultimate reality of the transitory composite is denied; the continuum lacks a core. “The drop is water,” said the Sufi Frithjof Schuon, “but water is not the drop.” To put this in more traditionally Buddhist terms: while each individual may be the product (and cause!) of an innumerable number of causes and conditions which are constantly arising and undergoing cessation, the individual is not reducible to them — because there isn't any subject to be absolutely reduced. Things arise dependently. We are, in essence, relational beings — essenceless.

Nevertheless, the idea that we maintain some sense of permanent identity that underlies, or is outside of, the changes we undergo over time is undeniably powerful. Our attraction to it is almost reflexive or intuitive. There are few good reasons why I think this sense of permanence-in-difference is so hard for us to shake. The first reason is perhaps mundane and the other probably less so.

The biological and cognitive limitations of human beings have to be considered. Humans, for all their myriad advantages over other living creatures, simply do not possess the necessary bio-

logical equipment to register certain changes in real time. Other animals even have a sensory advantage over us in significant respects. Dogs, for instance, can apparently register mutations on the cellular level in human beings through their heightened sense of smell. Humans simply cannot grasp these physical processes as they occur. Of course, the kinds of changes I am referring to are not merely biological. The social life of human beings — so much richer, denser, and more complex than any other living creatures, by an almost inconceivable margin — helps shape and maintain this sense of a permanent, abiding self. We are uniquely adept at constructing complex social worlds that feel almost more fundamental to our sense of identity than brute environmental or physiological facts. And while it is true that we may be partially aware of changes in the composition of our social fabric, so much of this world is inherited — and so much of it forms the conditions that make our shared experiences possible — that we can never wholly remove ourselves from it. No God's-eye view is possible; we are all leveled on the social plane. The milieu we inherit provides a template that we can employ to express the content of our experience in terms understandable to others. It is in the interest of a civilization that its central concepts remain rigid or fixed: this insures a degree of continuity and intelligibility over time and place. Whether this society's organizing principles conform in any way to reality is beside the point. The goal is self-reproduction, not truth.

Prizing self-reproduction or self-preservation over intellectual honesty is not only a function of human beings at the social level. It very much characterizes us as individuals. We may grasp in a highly abstract sense that life is fleeting, that identity is largely the result of social construction and is cruelly arbitrary: where we are born and when — facts wholly outside of our control — have made us who we are more than anything we have consciously done to craft our own personalities. But it is particularly difficult for us to *live* with this knowledge and to incorporate it into the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to the world. This

a framework that privileged the material over the ideational. All three of these thinkers — diverse, confounding and brilliant as they are — argued for end-states that I don't think would be considered possible, desirable, or supported by the Buddhist "emptiness" traditions. Rousseau saw freedom arise through one's fulfillment in the general will of the body politic; Hegel pinned his hopes on the State itself; Marx believed that violent class conflict would eventually cause the existing political order to wither away, which would then flower into a post-messianic era. All three saw power as something necessarily concentrated, and then only diffused in an abstract sense, or after the real "work" of politics was completed. If there is a political philosophy of emptiness, it is surely not statist or voluntarist in nature. This is too unidirectional, too authoritarian in the literal sense. If anything, a Buddhist politics of freedom may best be conceived of as a libertarian socialism of the mind, or an anarcho-syndicalism of the spirit.

As much as Buddhism may be conceived of as containing the seeds of a political philosophy, these three Western thinkers, in particular, may be viewed according to their "religious elements." Marx in particular thought of philosophy as a discipline that contained revealed truths that, put in practice, could lead to human liberation. He was only half right, though, when he said that previous philosophers had been mistaken because they only sought to understand the world, while the goal was to change it. His range of vision had been too narrow; he was too constrained in his conception of the political. The Buddhist project — the cultivation of wisdom in order to end suffering — is wholly active, because it has the capacity to completely color our vision of who we are in the world, and our place in it. Philosophy understood in this way is a form of praxis, and this conception of philosophy predates most of what is in the West commonly considered "appropriate to the discipline." It is a shame that until the twentieth century, most Western philosophers and scholars of religion characterized Buddhism as philosophically pessimistic in nature (Schopenhauer famously

human action. This is at the root of the political sphere, and all the other spheres of meaningful human activity.

I think that many well-versed in the emptiness tradition in Buddhism would find much that is agreeable about this notion about past, present, and future, and their relationship to human activity. After all, the most common translation of karma is “action,” and the interplay between what is burdensome and inherited and what is possible — what is *radically possible* — forms in many ways the cornerstone of Buddhist doctrine. Karma is a fundamental component of Buddhist soteriology — the promise of freedom from suffering and rote, but pervasive, dissatisfaction. This project, I think most Buddhists would assert, is necessarily individual, but I believe it is also undisputedly collective, and therefore political to its core. Or to put it in more rigidly philosophical terms: liberation of the individual is necessary, but only collective liberation is sufficient. The individual stands in relation to his milieu, and so his individual will is in a sense imbued with the collective, but this only necessarily shows that the collective must be overcome for some kind of personal liberation. What I am saying may be construed as paradoxical. To be fully human — to be an individual in the most meaningful and fundamental sense — one must be realized as part of a collective; but one’s actions, which cannot be reduced wholly to personal or social causes, drive this movement toward human freedom, and away from suffering. The individual drive toward action is central and sacrosanct, but it is not enough.

The emptiness tradition in Buddhism is dialectical, and it shares certain affinities with a tradition in Western philosophy that has been venerated and despised in equal measure. Generally traced to Rousseau and perhaps even more frequently to Hegel, this tradition sees the individual as wholly subsumable to some abstract notion of a “general will.” Hegel saw individual wills as mechanistic byproducts of the dialectical movement of “History,” realized in human consciousness, and subsequently perfected in the state. Marx grafted Hegel’s mechanism for historical change onto

problem is an old one, and it is not unique to Mahayana Buddhism or the product of my interpretation of some of its key concepts. The idea of a fundamental remove between what appears to be real and what is actually so, and that we should consequently change the way we live in order to harmonize with this newly revealed reality-as-it-is, has been a fertile one. It has formed the backbone of many political ideologies, religious systems, and social theories. The content of this revelation is always adjusted to fit its social and intellectual milieu, but the basic trope remains the same. What, then, is to be done?

In seeking out common archetypes we always risk doing violence to the uniqueness of the phenomena we are attempting to describe and understand. There are tremendous differences of interpretation related to the nature of the aforementioned problem as well as the potential solutions proffered by each system or theory. Original Sin and getting right with God; alienation from one’s labor due to unjust relations of production and the (temporary) institution of a proletarian dictatorship; the radical decline and emasculation of a nation or race through the introduction of foreign blood and ideas and the return to a pure, edenic past — the mechanism operating here is the same, even though the sources of discontent, and the potential solutions to it, differ greatly. While its content can range from relatively benign to downright iniquitous, the mechanism operating here is totally amoral.

The emptiness tradition within Buddhism offers what I think is a particularly radical account of this problematic. Grasping or attachment is said to lead to a kind of general malaise, or suffering. But this “grasping,” and the upwelling of desire that accompanies it, is not limited to our normal understanding of the term. It is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of objects. We behave as if they are permanent, even if we know intellectually that this is impossible. The imposition of permanence on impermanent — empty — objects of desire is the fundamental cause of our suffering.

It is that simple, but of course, it is not all that simple.

The idea that we possess some pure, unadulterated core to our selves is deeply ingrained in most religious traditions, presumed in many of our political ideologies, and propped up by our own grasping egos. In other words, it forms a basic building block of our psychic and social worlds. But it is as wrong as it is pervasive. In order to build a reconstituted theory of the self and the way we are in the world, we first have to rid ourselves of this jaundiced perspective. At first, this is easier to do when we abstract away from our own egos, and is why an essay that I initially conceived of as a kind of personal reflection transmogrified into an account of a type of speculative metaphysics. Process philosophies like those from the Buddhist emptiness tradition are always easier to grapple with, and to grasp, from some remove.

But I don't think exercises of this type are necessarily fruitless. The possible experience of the metaphysical is tantalizing, because it holds the promise of the widest cognitive horizon for human beings. The existence of some kind of greater or ultimate reality is not actually necessary — what really matters is our own desire for it, the irresistible impulse we have toward experiencing the “oceanic feeling” described by Freud.³ This longing for the eternal and basic universal order takes many forms, only one of which is manifested in what we consider the religious realm. We may long for the City of God, but we plan for the City of Man, and much human activity is directed toward perfecting this form of social organization. As diverse as they are predictable, political orders rely on cosmic creation myths and the promise of a transcendent tomorrow. Rome grew fat on the stories of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a

³ In an instance of cross-cultural metaphorical congruence, the idealist Yogacara, or Mind-Only, school of Buddhism posits the existence of the *alayavijñana*, or universal storehouse consciousness that serves as the foundation of law for all reality. The storehouse consciousness is sometimes likened to an ocean, and our thoughts, desires, and ego-driven actions compared to specific waves within it.

in many ways define us; the basic categories of knowledge that not only condition our experience but make it coherent and transmissible to others; the whole mass of human experience, from the profound to the mundane — all require a certain assumption that the future will perpetually conform to the past, that the sun will rise tomorrow. Is there any harm in our conceiving of politics in the same manner?

Perhaps not, but only if we remain cognizant that politics essentially requires a continuous leap of faith. Faith is required to sustain our political institutions, which are, at best, temporal and prone to error, in the collective imaginary that produces and sustains our “imaged communities,” and in the generally debased but occasionally altruistic behavior of those who we refer to as our “politicians,” as if the activity of politics, and not its result, could be professionalized. It may not be necessary or desirable to create the world anew with every generation, but to lose our awareness of this possibility would be tragic. It would mean we forgot what it meant to be political, to be human, to be *shunya*.

Edmund Burke famously observed that “history is a pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn.” The essential kernel of wisdom in this idea is that politics occurs in a continuum: we are always already impregnated with the past, even as we necessarily orient ourselves toward the future. In this sense, there is no actual present, or, alternatively, there is nothing but the “eternal” present, imbued in some way with the past and future as potentiality. We feel eternally present in our own lives. We also feel that our political communities somehow stretch out beyond time, as a measure of our own immortality, or as proof of our participation in something truly immortal. But actions undertaken long ago have situated us in this present, and will at least partially direct our future endeavors. Granted, within this individual and collective determinism, there is always some room for choosing — for that process of willing — that produces real, unadulterated

This is an idea that many find reflexively repellent. The notion that a sovereign can somehow transcend the legal order by defining the limits of “the legal” and — poof — employ only his volition to create law from nothing, just to set that newfound order aflame, *ad infinitum*, is unsettling. But why is it so? For centuries, kings and emperors explicitly invoked the autocracy of the Heavenly Kingdom to justify their own rule. Absolute monarchies gave way to their softer, constitutional cousins, and while the range of circumstances where the use of the exception was deemed acceptable constricted, the *idea* of the exception did not. Nor did the (uneven and incomplete) global transition to liberal democracy portend the end of the sovereign exception. In fact, it doesn’t even appear that there is historically linear movement in this direction. And while power may be more diffuse than it was during the age of the absolute monarch, it seems that, whether in today’s liberal democracies or yesterday’s conservative autocracies, the exception perseveres. The more sovereignty changes, the more the sovereign exception remains the same.

This begs the question: for all the seismic changes that the international political order has undergone in the last fifty years — not to mention the last hundred and fifty — what essential kernel has remained constant? What fuels the sovereign exception? What I would like to suggest is that since our political leaders have explicitly imitated the structure of rule suggested by our theological ideals, and that these ideals, centered on the common, vulgar conception of God as an omnipotent, omniscient, trans-temporal deity, have caused us to suffer from a pervasive kind of intellectual blindness. In permeating everything from our theological to our political ideals, this set of tropes forms much of the basis for our world.

It may be the case, however, that the illusion of our own permanence and the permanence of our social world is both necessary and desirable for us to carry about the business of our daily lives. The web of relationships we cultivate throughout our lives and that

she-wolf. The American republic burdens its sons and daughters with the promise of promise, the idea of well-ordered liberty, the freedom of limitless choice. After the revolution, one can hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and philosophize at the dinner table... The sheer diversity of these political foundation myths and desired end states say more about human beings than the goods they promise or legitimacy they attempt to concretize. Politics is a social activity, and it is central to who we are. No matter what form of social organization we think ideal, we cannot escape its grasp. If, in its most rarified form, the desire for order and permanence is metaphysical in nature, politics forms the next, smaller ring in the concentric circles that, emanating inward, helps constitute the self.

If man differentiates himself from all other beings by being the “rational animal,” willing together in some kind of social sphere — creating a shared world — then in order to develop a better sense of the nature of our own identity we have to reckon with this social impulse, and more importantly, how it intensifies our sense of permanence. It may be driven in some sense by this higher impulse, but it stands on its own, and pushes back. We take cosmic concepts and make them vulgar, and then the vulgar becomes transcendent.

Along with his many other keen insights, Carl Schmitt observed that that the major organizing principles of the modern state were all theological concepts made secular, and that, taken together, these concepts formed a kind of “political theology.” For instance, take the idea of sovereignty. Sovereignty has a tortured genealogy, but can be traced at least in part to the idea of God as an absolutely powerful will.⁴ A God-as-absolutely-powerful-will — a voluntarist God — is the God capable of miracles. But it is also the God who destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, and who commands Abraham to

⁴ This is in contradistinction to those thinkers who have conceived of God in a more relational sense, like some early Catholic theologians. Take for instance Aquinas’s famous description of a “great chain of being” where every being from the lowliest to the most advanced form a continuum leading up to the Creator.

sacrifice Isaac. This God is not only pure, unmitigated will, but also *one who can will what was previously deemed outside the realm of the possible*. In religion, this act is identified as “the miracle.” The parallel that Schmitt drew attention to was between the structure of the miracle in theology and “the exception” in politics. This kind of ruler is famously described in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: endowed with absolute power, he alone prevents the inevitable descent into chaos, the war of “all against all.” Since his rule is absolute, he can decide whenever “exceptional measures” should be taken. Of course, in our day, the absolute monarchy seems almost quaint (when it actually occurs, such as in North Korea, or until recently, Turkmenistan, it feels cruelly anachronistic). In fascist Germany, this idea of government probably saw its most complete modern manifestation; Hannah Arendt even went so far to observe that the defining feature of totalitarian government is its ability to rule by decree. But even in our moderate, constitutional republics the idea of this kind of sovereign remains potent: it is what allowed, say, Richard Nixon to claim that when the U.S. president performs an action it is by that very fact definitively legal.

Like his political analogue, a voluntarist God is taken to possess unlimited rule in his Kingdom. He is able to make manna rain from the heavens; smite whole cities that incur his wrath; and torture pious men like a cat playfully paws at a mouse. His willpower is absolute. His word makes law, but he can also subvert or contradict his previous commandments on a whim, as cruel or as arbitrary as this may seem. In short, he is a tyrant. This image of the deity, vulgar as it may be, should be a surprise to absolutely no one with any degree of expose to popular religion.⁵ What is so striking is that so few succeed in drawing a straight line between their (explicit) religious and (implicit) political commitments.

⁵ Of course, the idea of the willful, vengeful God is one primary image among a few others, such as the God-as-love sometimes emphasized in Christianity.

For those of us who, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, believe that liberal democracy is the best possible type of political system, the fact that our own religious traditions feature an often — illiberal deity sits in tension with our political commitments. How can we assent to such unlimited power in one sphere of human affairs while advocating for its dispersal and containment in another? Why does our ideal political ruler differ so fundamentally from our ideal spiritual sovereign? Particularly for those committed to the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, this disjunction causes strain: a simple “rendering unto Caesar” is insufficient. In particular, the principle of the rule of law — a cornerstone of the modern political order — seems irreconcilably opposed to the voluntaristic conception of sovereignty (unless, of course, rule and law are synonymous, which would mean tyranny). In setting laws outside the whim of individual or collective wills, the rule of law establishes a kind of power outside individual human power, a demarcation that cannot be violated because doing so would tear open the social compact that permits laws and political societies to exist, and moreover, flourish.

But perhaps we delude ourselves in thinking that power or authority can ever be truly subsumed by some abstract impersonal notion of the law, or, even if it were possible, that it would actually be desirable. We can’t predict the future with absolute certainty, and neither can the law know the outmost limit of its own applicability. The final decision must rest with someone; the unforeseen in human affairs must be reckoned with, because problems arise in human affairs that previously seemed not only unlikely but completely outside of our collective field of vision. Someone, in other words, must be sovereign. And to be sovereign, in Schmitt’s terms, is to be “he who decides on the exception.” Thus *someone* must know not just what the correct decision may be given extraordinary circumstances, but possess the ability to *decide* which circumstances warrant transcending the legal, moral, or political order itself.