

ESSAY XXXIV

Order Without Total Authority

Coordination, Contestability, and the Unfinished Common World

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ABSTRACT

The preceding essays examine different relations through which persons become subject to authority: dependence, membership, classification, deference, hierarchy, ownership, collective decision, and institutional responsibility. This concluding essay asks whether those relations require one comprehensive authority capable of settling every question about the whole person. It distinguishes coordination from centralization, divided competence from organized irresponsibility, and correctability from the perpetual reopening of every decision. Engaging Hobbes on settlement, Hayek on dispersed knowledge, and Ostrom on polycentric governance, it argues that the scope of authority cannot be inferred merely from the need for order. Authority must be related to a determinate task, while the relations among tasks require connective procedures and continuing responsibility. An illustrative network for preserving local observations tests the account against inconsistent records, shared resources, concentrated discretion, and gaps between jurisdictions. The essay also addresses the regress of oversight, the burden of maintaining corrective institutions, and the limits of reversibility. Its conclusion is an analytical architecture rather than a universal institutional blueprint: common action requires both the capacity to decide and the capacity to recognize when a decision has exceeded its warrant.

Keywords: human order; limited authority; coordination; polycentricity; correctability; institutional design; responsibility; synthesis

Conceptual analysis and critical reconstruction. Cases introduced as illustrations are hypothetical, not empirical findings.

1. The aspiration to complete the architecture

A theory of order can be tempted by completion. Once different institutions have been examined, it may appear that the remaining task is to arrange them beneath one final principle or decision-maker. The resulting system would identify every rightful authority, allocate every responsibility, and supply a procedure for every conflict. Nothing consequential would remain outside its jurisdiction. Yet this aspiration changes the original question. An inquiry into the limits of authority becomes a proposal for an authority whose subject is all the limits.

The opposite temptation is to treat every limit as a reason to abandon coordination. If no institution is competent to govern everything, perhaps each person or association should simply act within its own understanding. But the problems examined in this volume arise precisely because activities overlap. Shared resources, reliance, commitments, and unintended consequences connect people who do not share every purpose. The absence of one comprehensive authority does not remove the need to determine what happens when their actions conflict.

Part One described the collection as an integrated architecture of review rather than a closed philosophical system (Silentii 2026a, General Introduction and Essay X). Part Two examined the institutional forms through which legal decisions become recognizable and contestable (Silentii 2026b, Essays XI and XXI). Part Three has moved into the broader social relations that make authority effective before, within, and beyond formal law. Its concluding task is not to convert those relations into one sovereign subject, but to explain how their differences can remain intelligible within common life.

The central argument is that coordination requires relations among powers, not merely a distribution of isolated powers or their unconditional concentration. A task must be assigned, a decision must sometimes become operative, and an error must have somewhere to go. None of those requirements entails that one institution may define the whole person or decide every question by the same standard. The architecture remains unfinished because its users, condi-

tions, and consequences remain capable of changing what its arrangements require.

2. Three problems that no single description resolves

Hobbes's account of commonwealth emphasizes the need for an authority able to settle conflicts that private judgments cannot reliably terminate (Hobbes 1651, chaps. 17–18). Hayek emphasizes that relevant knowledge is dispersed and includes particular circumstances not already collected in one mind (Hayek 1945). Ostrom examines arrangements with multiple centers of decision-making and challenges the assumption that complex governance problems admit only a simple choice between markets and states (Ostrom 2010). These positions do not compose a single doctrine. They identify different problems that an account of order must distinguish.

Settlement asks how incompatible actions become one operative course. Knowledge asks how relevant information becomes available to the people who must act. Institutional plurality asks how different centers of decision can coordinate, monitor, or constrain one another. Solving one problem does not automatically solve the others. A final office can settle a question while lacking crucial information. A knowledgeable local participant can understand a condition without possessing authority over its effects on others. Several institutions can exist without any workable relationship among their decisions.

The present account draws an analytical implication rather than endorsing a universal arrangement. One must ask which task is being assigned, what information it requires, how it affects other tasks, and what makes the assignment answerable. Authority is not a single quantity whose distribution can be judged without describing its uses. The power to maintain a record differs from the power to determine access; the power to hear an appeal differs from the power to define the entire activity's purpose.

Nor can the distinction between local and central settle the issue by itself. A local body may possess relevant knowledge while excluding some affected people. A larger body may provide resources or a hearing unavailable locally while misunderstanding particular circumstances. These are possible configurations, not empirical claims

about every institution of either kind. Their importance is that institutional scale and normative adequacy are distinct questions. The argument requires relations and evidence, not a ranking of scale in the abstract.

3. An illustrative network of partial knowledge

Imagine several associations preserving observations of a shared landscape. Each maintains records of a different location. A coordinating archive combines the records so that participants can identify changes across the whole area. Local record keepers understand features that the central archive cannot observe directly. The archive can compare patterns that no local keeper could see alone. The undertaking depends on both kinds of contribution.

A dispute arises because two sites use different categories. One records a temporary absence as missing data; another records it as zero. Combining the entries without context produces an apparent pattern that neither site's records alone support. The archive cannot solve the problem simply by trusting local records, because their meanings differ. Nor can it solve the problem by imposing one category without consulting those who know what was observed. The need is for a procedure connecting descriptions while preserving relevant distinctions.

Suppose the archive's director responds by claiming authority over every local method. That response may exceed what comparison requires. Suppose the local associations respond by rejecting all common standards. That response may defeat the joint purpose they undertook. The philosophical issue concerns the relation between standardization and local judgment: which differences prevent the common task, which preserve information, and which require a translation rather than elimination?

The example then introduces a third party. People whose activities are described in the records challenge a public interpretation. They may not possess authority to alter accurate observations merely because the interpretation is unwelcome. They may nevertheless have relevant evidence about context, a claim against false identification, or an interest in how information about them is disclosed. The net-

work cannot decide every question by asking only whether the record keeper or archive is technically competent. Different forms of authority and standing enter at different points.

4. Domain boundaries and the transfer of authority

The volume's first three essays examined the relation between social formation and personal standing. Dependence can make agency possible without granting the provider unrestricted control. Membership can create obligations without giving a group authority over every aspect of a member's life. A classification can organize an activity without determining a person's comprehensive worth. These are different cases of one inferential problem: a limited relationship is treated as if it supplied a total title.

The next three essays examined how that transfer can occur through ordinary authority. Expertise can justify deference without settling every practical consequence. Competence can support a role assignment without establishing a general hierarchy of human standing. Ownership can protect the control of resources without automatically authorizing every condition imposed on those who need access. Each essay required identifying the additional premise that would be necessary to move from one kind of authority to another.

This analysis does not establish that domains are always separate in practice. Decisions about resources can affect membership; classifications can affect access; institutional roles can affect responsibility. The point of distinguishing domains is not to deny interaction. It is to prevent interaction from becoming an unargued identity. Where a decision crosses a boundary, the new effects and claims must be examined rather than treated as already settled by the original authorization.

In the observation network, competence to classify a measurement does not automatically authorize a public allegation about a person. Authority to coordinate categories does not automatically include authority to determine the local association's unrelated activities. Conversely, a claim to local independence does not erase commitments to supply intelligible records. Bounded authority has a positive as

well as a negative aspect: it identifies what an institution must do as well as what it may not claim merely because it performs that task.

5. Interfaces: where limited jurisdictions meet

A system of limited authorities needs procedures at their points of contact. Without them, the person seeking an answer can be transferred indefinitely between offices. Each office may accurately deny that it possesses complete jurisdiction. The combined result can still leave an outstanding claim unaddressed. This is not a logical contradiction in any one office's statement; it is a defect in the relationship among them.

The network's disputed record illustrates the problem. The local keeper controls the original entry, the archive controls the combined interpretation, and a publication team controls the public report. Correcting the original entry may not change copies already distributed. Withdrawing the report may not repair a false identification. No office can complete the response alone, but that does not mean no response is owed. The undertaking requires a connection among correction, communication, and responsibility for downstream uses.

An interface must therefore specify more than who can refuse a request. It must make intelligible who initiates a response, who receives relevant information, how conflicting classifications are handled, and what counts as completion. Where a matter falls outside one institution's competence, the next step must be distinguishable from simple dismissal. This is an implication of accepting a coordinated undertaking, not a general permission for every institution to expand its own jurisdiction.

The objection is that connective procedures can themselves become a new centralized authority. That is possible if their scope expands without limit. But coordinating the relation between two tasks is not conceptually identical to taking over both tasks. A body can determine how records are reconciled without deciding all observations or all uses of them. Whether that limited function can be sustained in practice requires evidence about its powers and constraints. The need for an interface does not answer its own design question.

6. Correctability, finality, and time

A correctable order is not one in which every decision is always reopened. Such a requirement would destroy the possibility of reliance and consume resources without end. Correctability concerns the relation between a decision and grounds that can defeat or qualify it. A system can establish deadlines, thresholds, and final stages while preserving other routes for acknowledging error, revising future practice, or addressing consequences that remain.

The distinction developed in Essay XXIX is central: procedural finality need not entail normative immunity. An archive may close a routine review while preserving a mechanism for demonstrable inaccuracies. A publication may remain part of the historical record while receiving a correction. A completed allocation may be impossible to reverse while still creating an obligation to explain or address loss. These responses differ because correction is not always a return to an earlier state.

Time also distributes burdens. A person whose livelihood depends on a decision may not be able to wait as long as an institution whose operations continue during review. An immediate response can protect against a serious risk while also increasing the possibility of error. Neither speed nor delay is intrinsically neutral. The inquiry must examine what each does to the affected parties and which consequences remain reversible after the procedure ends.

Reversibility itself has limits. Some lost opportunities, damaged materials, or disclosed information cannot be restored. A theory of organized repair cannot treat the existence of an appeal as permission to impose avoidable irreversible costs. The prospect of later correction is relevant only to what correction can actually accomplish. Acknowledging that limit does not make all action impossible. It changes the burden of justification attached to acting before the uncertainty has been reduced.

7. The people who maintain the conditions of criticism

Answerability requires work. Records must be preserved, explanations written, evidence evaluated, requests received, and corrections communicated. These tasks consume time, attention, training, and resources. An account that celebrates the right to challenge while treating its maintenance as costless would conceal the labor through which the right becomes usable.

The burden can fall unevenly. A person may need to repeat a complaint because offices do not share information. Staff may be assigned responsibility for review without the time required to perform it. An institution may announce access while relying on unpaid assistance from people outside it. These hypothetical arrangements reveal a common distinction between declaring a procedure and providing its conditions. A right that depends on resources nobody is responsible for supplying may remain formally recognizable but practically weak.

The argument is not that every complaint must receive unlimited attention. Repetitive, irrelevant, or intentionally obstructive demands can also consume the capacity needed by others. An account of accessible review must distinguish a threshold for considering a claim from a requirement to accept it. It must also explain how to identify misuse without treating difficulty of expression, unfamiliarity, or persistence as sufficient proof that a claim lacks merit.

This produces a reflexive requirement. The procedures through which authority becomes answerable must themselves be open to examination of purpose, burden, and effects. A corrective institution does not become exempt because correction is its stated function. Yet reflexivity need not require an endless hierarchy of identical reviewers. Different forms of scrutiny can address different questions, and practical endpoints can coexist with continuing evaluation. The absence of a flawless final observer is a condition of the problem, not a reason to pretend one exists.

8. The person who occupies several relations

Human order contains intersecting roles. One person can be a worker, parent, learner, owner, caregiver, member, and dissenter. Each role can create real obligations. None by itself supplies a complete account of the person. The problem of total authority arises when one relation claims the power to interpret all the others or to decide which aspects of a life count as relevant.

The person is not thereby entitled to treat roles as sealed compartments that excuse contradiction. A commitment in one setting can affect duties in another. Confidentiality, time, care, and the use of common resources can create conflicts that require explanation. Personal integrity includes coordinating obligations rather than ignoring their interaction. But coordinating them differs from conceding that one institution may define their entire order on the person's behalf.

The account is especially important where exit is costly or unavailable. A person can require support without becoming property, remain a member while dissenting, or owe repair without losing every claim to privacy and participation. These distinctions resist the reduction of a life to the most institutionally convenient description. They do not remove accountability. They specify its jurisdiction so that responsibility for an act does not become unrestricted authority over a person.

In the observation network, a record keeper's mistake can require correction and review of entrusted responsibilities. It does not automatically determine the keeper's standing in unrelated relationships. Similarly, an affected person's interest in an accurate record does not give them authority to control every inquiry. The same principle operates in both directions: a consequential claim must identify the relation that warrants it and the limits beyond which that warrant no longer reaches.

9. Strong objections to an unfinished order

The first objection is that a framework of distinctions lacks the decisiveness of a unified theory. It does not specify one institutional arrangement for every conflict. That limitation is real. The framework is an architecture of inquiry, not a complete constitution. Its value must be judged by whether its distinctions change what must be established in a particular case. If they merely rename a preferred conclusion, they have failed their own purpose.

The second objection is that the framework begins from contested normative commitments. Why should agency, vulnerability, reciprocity, or answerability matter? Part One acknowledges that these commitments are not produced by a complete derivation of morality from a single indisputable premise (Silentii 2026a, General Introduction). The present volume likewise does not disguise them as measurements. It examines the implications of addressing others as participants whose claims require consideration, while leaving the justification of that orientation open to argument.

A third objection is that multiple authorities can collude or share the same blind spots. Formal separation therefore does not guarantee independent scrutiny. This objection is decisive against treating the number of institutions as sufficient evidence of correctability. Independence concerns the relations among their information, incentives, powers, and sources of judgment. Several offices can repeat one conclusion from one source. One institution can also contain practices of criticism that matter. Actual relations, rather than organizational labels, are the relevant evidence.

A fourth objection invokes catastrophe: a sufficiently urgent problem may require concentrated action. The framework does not deny that possibility. It asks what concentration is needed for which task, what evidence supports the urgency, and what happens when the immediate need ends. Necessity can justify an action under particular conditions without granting an enduring title to every future decision. The scope of an exceptional power remains a claim to be specified, not an implication contained in the word emergency.

10. The limits of the method and the work that remains

Conceptual analysis can expose an invalid inference, distinguish questions, and clarify the conditions a proposal must satisfy. It cannot by itself establish how an institution actually operates or predict all consequences of changing it. The illustrative cases in this volume are not empirical demonstrations. They isolate relations that would require investigation in a concrete setting. Historical and contemporary sources provide intellectual context; they do not convert each proposed distinction into a measured result.

A practical assessment would need evidence about the relevant population, task, resources, decision rights, knowledge, burdens, and available alternatives. It would need to distinguish formal rules from actual practices and examine whether a supposed remedy can be used. It would also need to consider how a change affects people who are absent from the initial description. These requirements identify an agenda for inquiry rather than a claim that the agenda has already been completed.

The same restraint applies to originality. Naming bounded finality, domain transfer, or relational standing does not establish that no earlier thinker identified similar problems. The contribution of the present collection lies in the organization and application of distinctions across domains. Its arguments must be evaluated by their coherence, explanatory usefulness, and response to counterexamples rather than by the novelty of a label or the comprehensiveness of an architectural metaphor.

An unfinished order is therefore not a celebration of vagueness. It is an order whose determinate arrangements do not pretend to exhaust every future question. It can preserve commitments, act under pressure, and allocate tasks while retaining means of learning that a category was inadequate, a burden concealed, or a decision made outside its warrant. Revision matters because the world and the persons governed are not completed by the descriptions through which institutions first encounter them.

11. Conclusion: a common world without a final owner

The Architecture of Human Order begins from the fact that judgment cannot be avoided and asks what follows when judgment acquires authority over others. Part Three has examined how this authority emerges through relations that are not exhausted by law: formation, belonging, normality, obedience, rank, property, collective action, trust, and toleration. Their common difficulty is not the mere existence of influence. It is the move from a specific relation to a claim that exceeds what the relation can justify.

Order without total authority is consequently neither order without decisions nor order without obligations. It requires the capacity to coordinate, settle, maintain, and repair. It also requires that these capacities remain distinguishable from the stronger claims of unlimited competence and immunity. An institution can be necessary without being sufficient for every task. A procedure can be final without being infallible. A relationship can be binding without owning the person whose participation sustains it.

The unfinished common world has no final owner because no participant's role, knowledge, contribution, or historical position by itself supplies a title to determine the whole. That conclusion does not abolish authority; it identifies the additional justification required whenever authority expands. The person and the institution remain answerable to one another through reasons, evidence, commitments, and consequences whose significance no single description can exhaust.

The collection therefore concludes this volume with a discipline rather than a promise of completion. Determine what the claim means. Identify the relation that supports it. Examine the cost of granting it. Locate the persons whose standing it affects. Distinguish the need to act from a claim that no objection remains. Human order becomes a philosophical problem wherever a necessary arrangement begins to present itself as an unquestionable one. It remains a human achievement wherever the arrangement can change because those questions were taken seriously.

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