

The Reality of Societal Structures

1. The question for this paper is the status and nature of the structural entities which everyone experiences in his life; family, state, marriage, institutional church, business, labor union, etc. How is one to account for these structures, which we shall hereafter refer to as societal structures, philosophically? What is their ontic status? How is it possible that such structures retain their identity in spite of the change in individual members? How is it possible that marriage, to take an example, is still recognized to be marriage in spite of the changing forms of marriage in history?

2. Generally speaking, there are two historical traditions which have developed in answer to these questions. One tradition presupposes the existence of a super-historical, eternal, rational, absolute order for society; the other considers societal structures the inventions of individual men, and thus fictions.

In the former view, societal structures are to reflect or mirror the eternal order of Reason (often identified with God). There is an eternal, rational pattern fixed and unalterable in content, always and everywhere the same which holds for human society and which is unfolded in the so-called natural order of things. Structures in this view take on an in themselves autonomous character, only later to be conceived as parts of some greater whole.

In the latter view there is no order for justice prior to positive law or contractual agreements. There is no transcendental reference in societal structures; they are along with values completely man-made or better man-created. The structure of relationships is "received" solely from the desires and wants of a certain society at a certain time. Any particular structure is throughout

its entire texture open to change and is basically experimental. Terms such as family, state, business, etc. are merely symbols to which corresponds no (metaphysical) reality. Societal structures are not real. The terms referring to such entities are conceptual inventions which have a certain utility in referring to certain kinds of contractual relationships among individuals. Employing such terms allow men to put some order into the otherwise chaotic world of human relationships.

3. The approach outlined in this paper wishes to break radically with both traditions and to present a more adequate explanation of societal structures. To that end the Philosophy of the Law-Idea, forged by the Dutch philosophers H. Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th Vollenhoven, and presently being refined in various centers, will be utilized. To place the problem in perspective certain fundamental matters must first be explained.

4. To say that meaning is the being of all creatively reality is to express philosophically what the Christian community has believed through the ages when she confessed that God created the world. That even now few philosophers who confess to be Christians talk about meaning in this way makes it all the more imperative that this paper begin with a philosophically hewn confession of faith. By not announcing that creation has meaning, rather by confessing that created existence is meaning, at the outset the notion of substance has been undermined. Everything in creation exists only in reference to and in relation with God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son. Creation points to its Creator, and that indication is its meaning, its existence.

To confess this is to acknowledge the creation of the world by the Word of God: "and God said, let there be ... and there was." God spoke and by His Word the worlds were formed. Nothing exists in itself or for itself. All things were created by God through the Son and reconciled by God through the Son. All things are upheld by "the word of His power". God's Word of Creation called

creation into being and the same Word holds it to this day in place in Jesus Christ in whom all things cohere (cf. Genesis 1, Proverbs 8, Job 38, John 1, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1).

The only continuity between God and his creation is the Word, the Law-Word. Without this Word, the world would simply pass away. And the Spirit of the Lord leads and moves the creation according to the direction of the Word to the eschaton.

Any idea of substance as something that can possess itself and be self-existent is contrary to the Scriptures. Substance as the unknown X essence standing in itself by which a thing could change and still retain its identity is not required--and is rejected as illegitimate. Societal structures too, it will become clear, do not depend on some hidden substance idea for their reality. They depend for their (relative) identity and reality on the Word of God which is revealed to man and which is written in the hearts of men in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:33; Ezekiel 11:19, 20).

5. The God-Word-Creation series is translated philosophically as Origin-Law/Word-Meaning. The entire cosmos is delimited in its meaning by the meaning-determining law. These two "sides" are in immediate correlation. Without law (to condition and determine), existence is impossible. Without that which is subject to the law, law is without meaning. The law-order is the necessary condition for creaturely existence, and on the other hand, limits and defines that existence. Bound by the law; that is, placed in the "room" where possibilities open up, man is free to act. This distinction (not separation) between law and that which is subject to the law, between meaning-determining law and meaning is crucial to Biblically attuned philosophizing.

6. The law-order structures, directs and upholds creation. God's Word lives and stands forever. The law-order is the structure-for the structures-of creation.

It is important to note this dual use of structure. Usually when one speaks of structures, he refers to the make-up of concrete totalities. Such structures belonging to reality and thus subject to the law I will refer to as structures-of. They are structures of meaning. At the same time it is the structures-for which delimit and make possible the structures-of. It is these structures-for meaning which are usually overlooked or are confused or identified with the structures-of. But it is just the structure-for which is the Word of God. The structure-for is the fundamental conditioning law which first makes possible the existence of things, events, societal structures etc. It is the structuring framework outside of which nothing exists or can exist.

Of course, as was already mentioned, the structure-for is in immediate correlation with the structure-of. There is not even, so to speak, a "vacuum" in between. To put it another way: the structures-for are realized in the structures-of. The structures-of are incarnations of the structures-for. This correlation is so important today because it is almost universally denied or ignored. To take one example, Joseph Fletcher in a mis-fired paraphrase of Jesus exclaims that "there is nothing outside of a situation which by going into it can pre-judge it" (Situation Ethics, 74). For him law is outside of the situation. He does not see that facts with the law-structure which makes them possible are the situation. Every situation is law-bound. There is correlation of law and facticity. This is simply the state of affairs given in creation.

7. One only discovers the structures-for (law) via, through and in the structure-of (facticity subject to the law). One acquires insight into the structures-for through observation of regularities and law-conformities given in the experiencing of structures-of. The structural laws hold for creation; they are never at hand capable of being grasped. Much rather they are the very conditions of that which is at hand and which can be grasped. All this means

that one in his concern for the structure-for is not leaving reality (metaphysically) as is often implied for the ethereal regions beyond. At the same time one is not empiricistically locked in facticity. Rather one goes to work empirically investigating experience in order through observed regularities to gain clearer insight into the transcendental order holding for reality.

It is not, it is well to note, that man can trace out surely the apriori structures-for from out his experience of the factual structures-of. This is true for two main reasons.

A. The process of implementation of the law-order--about which later--takes place gradually as history unfolds in a process of integration and differentiation. In this unfolding the contours of structures-for become increasingly clear.

B. Since the Fall the implementation of the structures-for into structures-of occurs imperfectly. Even when one is in Christ he sees but through a glass darkly. This means, clearly, that great caution is urged in describing the content of the structures-for.

However, even though our description of the structures-for is fallible and always open to correction, this does not affect in the least the obtaining-force of these laws. The structures-for are not dependent for their constitution on human knowledge. The task in science is to work ever harder to increase our insight into these for-structures.

The structures-for are unalterable in their fundamental structure and in their holding relate and unite men to one another in certain ways. Man can only act within the perimeter of these structures-for and ought to act in accordance with them.

8. There are at least two dimensions to this one order for creation: a modal dimension sets the diverse ways or modes in which entities can function and in which we can experience them, and an entity-structure dimension which sets in mainlines the structural make-up of concrete wholes, things, events, acts, communities, etc. which function in these diverse ways.

The ways of functioning never exist by themselves. They are always the modes of whats, of things. Such whats are never to be exhausted in the sum of these modes or functions. They are always "more"! The aspects abstract in themselves are grouped typically into an operational coherence and bound into a unity which is more than the sum of the aspects by entity-structures. A concrete thing is not a conglomerate of modal functions and cannot be reduced to one of these functions even if it is the qualifying function. In principle a concrete thing, man, plant, animal, societal structure function; in every aspect, be it as subject or object. Man in his experience meets such whats, such structures-of, as the realizations of entity-structures-for, everywhere. Such wholes are revealed to be typical groupages of modal aspects. In such groupages one aspect stands out as especially dominant. This qualifying function leads the unfolding of all the other aspects into a typical structural whole with its own identity and with an internal structure which can be examined. In any structural whole involving man two aspects stand out or come to the fore, the foundational as well as the qualifying one. A concrete thing, event, etc. is a relatively constant realization of its entity-structure.

The inner structural laws of these concrete wholes are invariant, inviolable and transcendental. They are the very conditioning structures-for which allow the possibility of experiencing the variable forms of these wholes in everyday experience. Through the factual, but variable forms, the structures-for become realized in the course of history.

9. Every individual thing is a member of a certain kingdom or radical type. The different kingdoms are determined by the fact that different modalities qualify and guide the groupage of modal functions within structural wholes and give these wholes their typical qualification and inner nature. Which kingdom a thing belongs to thus depends upon which modal subject or object function qualifies its nature.

There are at least the following kingdoms:

- A. the inorganic kingdom which has a typical kinematic (energy) qualification;
- B. the plant kingdom having a typical biotical qualification;
- C. the animal kingdom which is typically psychically qualified;
- D. and the diverse kingdoms or radical types pertaining to human societal life which are at least as numerous as the number of post-psychic aspects.

The structures-for these kingdoms need to be implemented in concrete existence. Inorganic matter realizes its structure-for in a typical rigidly prescribed manner. The plant kingdom demands adherence by plants in what appears to be a somewhat less restricted way than that of the inorganic. The animal kingdom structures-for allow a wider range of possible experiences than that of plants. Likewise the kingdoms pertaining to human life require human shaping. Because it is human formative activity that is required, the matter of these kingdoms is extremely complex. Man in contrast to animals, plants, etc. is a responsible creature and this first appears modally in the logical and technico-formative aspects. The laws for the pre-logical aspects (at least in their restrictive sense) and the entity-structures of inorganic, plant and animal kingdoms are realized in creation without human recognition and formation. In the logical and post-logical aspects (which I refer to as norm-laws) and in respect to societal structures-for the matter is otherwise. Here human

acknowledgement, concretization and formulation (the process of positivation) is required.

(In the above paragraph I am suggesting that the difference between the logical and the post-logical aspects and the pre-logical aspects is not as marked or as self-evident as it is sometimes made out to be. Obviously, due to their psychic qualification, animals have a wider range of movement than rocks with a kinematic qualification. At the same time it is striking that the logical and lingual norm-laws allow less room for human malfunctioning than for example the aesthetic and ethical norm-laws.)

10. To understand what is all involved in positivation it is necessary for a moment to consider that the Law-Word of creation is also the Freedom-Word. For human freedom is the fulfillment of the Law-Word. Human freedom is a response. It is answering God's call. It is the realization of the ontic possibilities in creation. This is important because contrary to humanistic and many so-called christian theories of freedom, the initiative in any talk of human freedom is not with man but with God's Law-Word. The law-order calls forth. Man in his freedom responds, but he responds to the questions asked. Only in responding to the law can man act. Man is not originally the questioner as Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre would have it; man is the questioned one, the respondent. Human freedom is responsibility within the order of creation. The relationship is something like that between question and answer. First comes the question which sets the tone and direction of the answer. Then comes the answer as necessary response, a response which adds something, which unfolds what is involved in the question.

11. It is not that the norm-laws or societal structures-for are any less law than the other law complexes which do not demand human formgiving. Rather, precisely in requiring recognition these particular laws hold and reveal their

law-character. The requisite human acknowledgement of the structures-for and their positivation into norms is the law-ordained means by which such laws are realized and effectuated. Thus it is mandatory to distinguish the structure-for from the structural norms which the structure-for assumes in the process of positivation. The structure-for is invariant, inviolable; the structural norms are variable positivations concomitant with the stage of historical integration and differentiation and made in accordance with present insight into the law-order. The structural norms posited, it is obvious, derive their validity, their holding force from the firmness and steadfastness of the law-order. Without the anchor relation to the law-order, such structural norms are adrift, and sooner or later would dash to pieces on the rocks of naturalism, historicism, relativism and subjectivism. In actual fact, this "breaking to pieces" is always hampered and ultimately defeated by the presence of the anchor. However, in that theoretical accounts seek to do without the anchor, they are fraught with tensions.

It is the glory of man's task as man that he is called upon to take a free, responsible, spontaneous role in the opening up of the meaning of creation in acts of positivation. Positivation, it is clear, is a human act and as such takes place subject to the law. However, the intended results of human positivizing are taken up in the normativity complex and receive normative status as structural norms. Although it remains difficult to explain, it can be said that the possibility (as well as the fact) that human concretizations acquire normative status rests as a given in the creation-order. It stands as the corollary of the "built-in" requirement of the norm-laws and societal entity structures that they be recognized and concretized before they function properly. For their realization these structures-for demand even as they induce human formative activity. This appeal to the subjective formative will is part and

parcel of their nature. On the one hand, it is not that these structures-for lose their holding power without the co-operation of the subject, only that their obtaining cannot come rightly into force. On the other hand, a subject in his law-bound situation cannot resist positivizing. That is, like it or not, as a man he must positivize. The question is whether he will positivize in obedience (and thus allow the goodness of the structures-for to shine through and pattern meaning) or in disobedience (and thus attempt to distort the development of meaning).

12. Thus, it is not only necessary to distinguish structures-for and structures-of, but it is also important to distinguish structures-for and the structural norms which are the positivation of the structures-for. The structures-of are set up in accord with structural norms which are the concretizations of the structures-for. Concretely, there can be many different structures-of in response to a structure-for via structural norms.

The confusion or identification of structures-for with the man-made structural norms is general. The results have been disastrous for all concerned. Many scientists today under the influence of the variability of humanly formulated laws end up denying the existence of any abiding, invariant structures holding for reality. Laws are at best in the spirit of operationalism, man-made models which serve as provisional directives for human activity until a better model can be constructed. On the other hand, burdened with the same confusion, theorists set on maintaining what is called the objective, eternal order of things are forced to defend outmoded scientific theories or at least to play down the relativity and change in laws. In the former case, certain that we must take into account changing formulations and evolving societal forms, the operationalist throws out the abiding law-order along with the out-moded responses to it. They, in effect, throw out the healthy

baby with the dirty bathwater. In the latter case in being forced to resist change, one in effect drowns the baby in dirty water.

Regardless of what position is taken, it is a serious business. For in both instances man-made norms are confused with or identified with the law-order of God. This can only cause problems.

Today both groups, uncomfortable with their positions, are taking refuge in the logic-lingual caves of so-called formal logic. All that is certain is analytic a priori. But, aside from the hollowness of such a certainty, the present Quine-White inspired attack on the sacredness of the analytic-synthetic distinction is a most consistent irrationalistic foray designed to deprive the philosophically engaged man of certainty even there, i.e. in his last supposed stronghold of formal logic.

13. Everyone, philosophically interested or not, in the integrity of his experience is aware of the difference between state, church, school, family, business, etc. In this situation it is surely erroneous to maintain that societal structures are the inventions of man and that everyday experiences makes one only aware of individuals. Every day experience is in fact more of a stranger to individuals than to societal communities. We always experience other men as members of some community, as a fellow-citizen, as a worker, as a father etc., and we never think of reducing such communities to individuals.

Man is also aware that there is continuity to his experience of these communities. What he recognizes today as state is still state tomorrow and the next day. He is also cognizant of the fact, if he reflects at all, that the state has retained its identity even though there have been diverse societal forms of the state through history. How is one to account for the enduring identity of such structures even though they have appeared in such a variety of forms as a result of varying historical conditions and of various human responses?

We do not have to introduce (a variation of) the substance-idea in order to account for this enduring identity. The structures-for which guarantee the identity of structures-of in spite of changing forms are not, I repeat here, metaphysical essences hovering above reality timelessly in Platonic or natural law fashion. It is a serious error to think that the structure for the family contains in kernel all the family forms which will appear in history. No, structures-for are revelation and demand a response. They are to be seen primarily as meaning-determining structures which stand at the beginning of human activity and condition it. They determine meaning in that at the beginning they set the direction and boundaries to the human work of positivation. The various structures-for direct and limit existence not as substances in themselves, but as particular dimensions of the Law-Word of God.

Neither--and this is perhaps more relevant today--do we have to deny the reality of societal structures and simply regard them as convenient creations of mankind in his interpersonal activities in order to account for the variability and variety.

It is my thesis that societal structures are real entities because they are responses to transcendental structures-for. Their identity is guaranteed by the structure-for even as this structure-for is realized in various forms in various times in history.

14. Today faced with the variety of societal forms it is customary to conceive of man as the creator of societal structures. But to move from this variability of forms to the conclusion that man is creator only holds if one identifies transcendental structures-for and man-formulated structural norms. The genetic and existential forms can change with historical development without this being cause to deny the transcendental structure-for such variable structures.

Each societal structure shows an inner unity made up of various parts. No structure in an individualistic or nominalistic way arises solely out of the mere interaction of individuals. It is always the response to the unfolding of an entity structure given in the order of creation. Only from within the inner nature of the community as a whole is it possible to understand the significance of the members as parts of the whole. Only, to take an example, when one takes into account the structure of marriage, can one understand the meaning of being husband and wife. Two people just living together do not constitute a marriage. They must be living together in a certain way--the way of marriage.

15. In fact without the structure-for there would be no possibility to even identify X state of affairs as being a marriage. Without such a structure-for (positivized into structural norms) there is no criterion to distinguish conjugal love from adultery or fornication. Whether a certain act is to be described as in fact adultery, fornication or conjugal love depends on the existence of the institution for marriage. If one does not accept the structure-for marriage and the form it has assumed in our society, it is impossible and makes no sense to distinguish adultery from conjugal love. (If one limits the description of the situation to the physical, biotic and psychical aspects involved, one does injustice to the factual situation. And human intercourse is reduced to animal copulation.)

16. If the structure-for marriage or for the family, to take examples, could possibly be changed in history, then every conceptual distinguishing of these structures would have lost its basis, meaning and possibility. It would be nonsense to speak of the historical development of the family if the family was constantly to be described as something else. Only when the family is recognized as having a set, invariant structure-for can one even talk of the

historical forms which the family has assumed in society.

If everything is gradually becoming something else, it is no longer meaningful to talk of animals, man, family, etc. One can only talk about changes in development if there is constancy to certain structures. Businesses and states are never described as new forms of the family. Why not? If the family has no internal structure-for, why not? Everyone (at least I hope everyone) realizes this point in his everyday experience. And theoretically it is recognized when it is found necessary to set up criteria in order to be able to talk at all about the family in distinction from its changing forms. But the setting up of such criteria is only possible when existence has been so structured that making such distinctions is possible and thus meaningful.

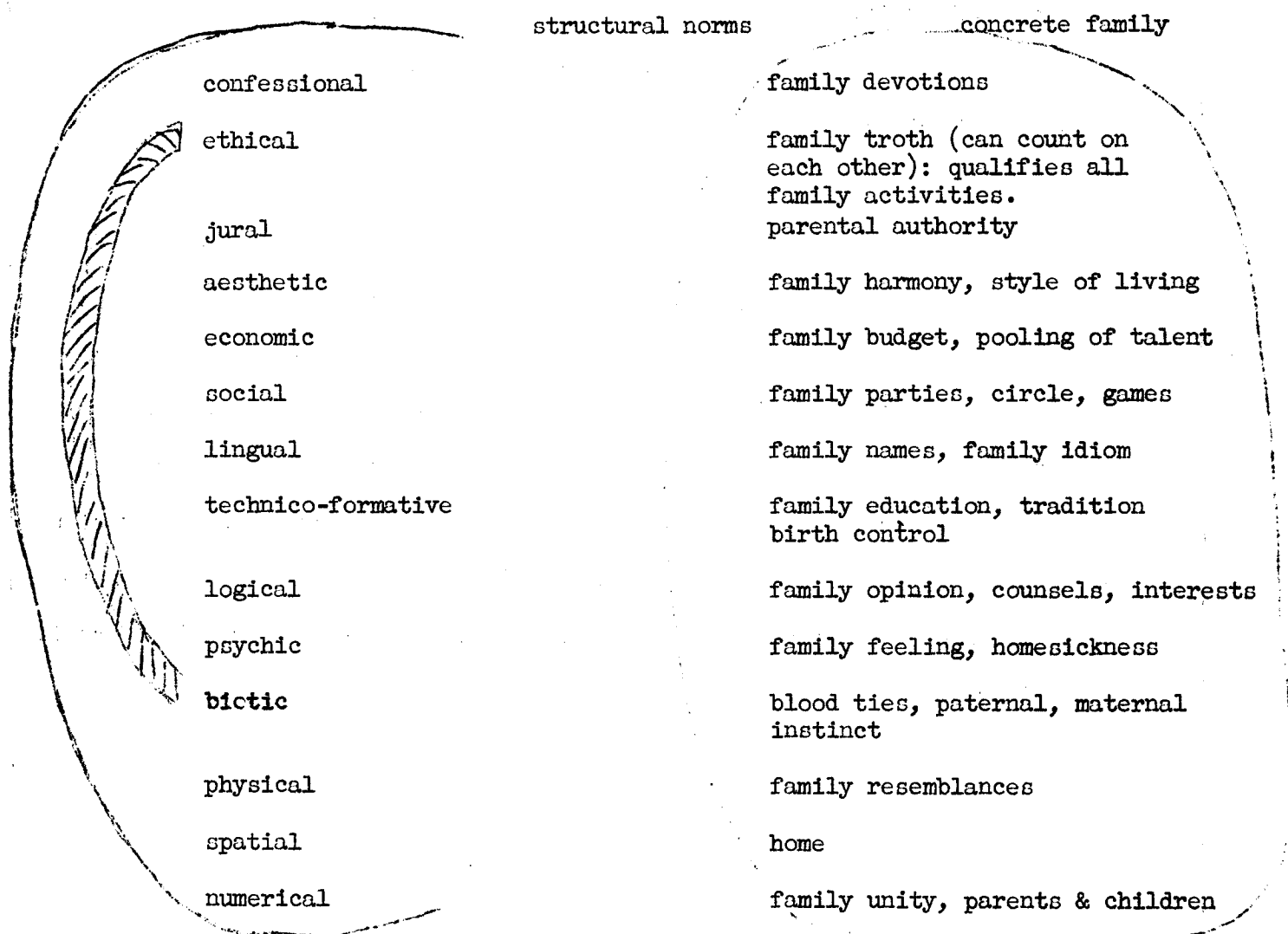
17. Without acceptance of societal structures-for as irreducible and inviolable, one is led necessarily to a levelling of these structures in the sense that they all become parts of one structural whole. The peculiarity and antinomy here is that a whole of one nature is said to be composed of parts which themselves have diverse natures.

18. If on account of the argumentation or on account of the Scriptures one is willing to accept divine structures-for marriage, family, church, labor, state, he soon becomes involved in a type of nature-grace dualism if he denies

divine structuration for business, school, art objects, etc., etc.

19. To perhaps give the discussion some more concreteness, let me give a brief analysis of the internal structure of the family. The family is or ought to be a community of truth between father and mother based on biotic blood ties. The inner structure of the family is characterized in all its activities by this moral-biotic structuration.

Typical structure for family:



20. The transcendental law-order is a blueprint to be implemented by man. It is a skeleton which must be fleshed-in by man. The structures-for are, so to speak, the main girders in response to which man is called to build. One might say that this is not much. But today it is precisely the existence of such structural foundations which is being anxiously questioned, and when we know that the structures-for are the revelational Word of God, we know that

we can count on it, that it is sufficient, that it demands our obedient positivizing. We know that we have everything we need. Now we must only trust this Word and get to work.

The idea of entity structures gives a theoretical accounting of the givens of everyday experience. I am convinced that this idea does account for such experience better than any other. Nevertheless, it will not be accepted in its integrity unless one begins from the faith confession that what the theory is tracing out is the Law-Word which God put to His creation. In Christ we know deeply, in our hearts, that creation is structured by the Word of God. In that knowledge we must theoretically seek to come to a better understanding of what that means. This paper was one small effort in that direction.

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