

Numbers, the World, and God on varieties of semantic anti-realism

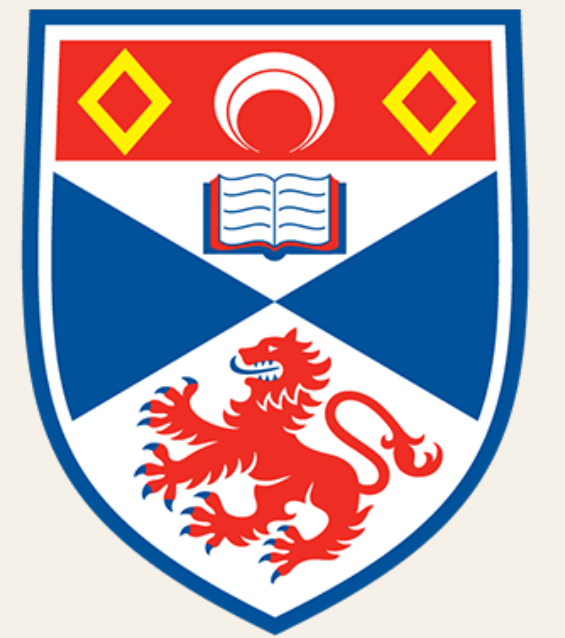
Symposium on Simon Hewitt's *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis* • EuARe 2023

Greg Restall

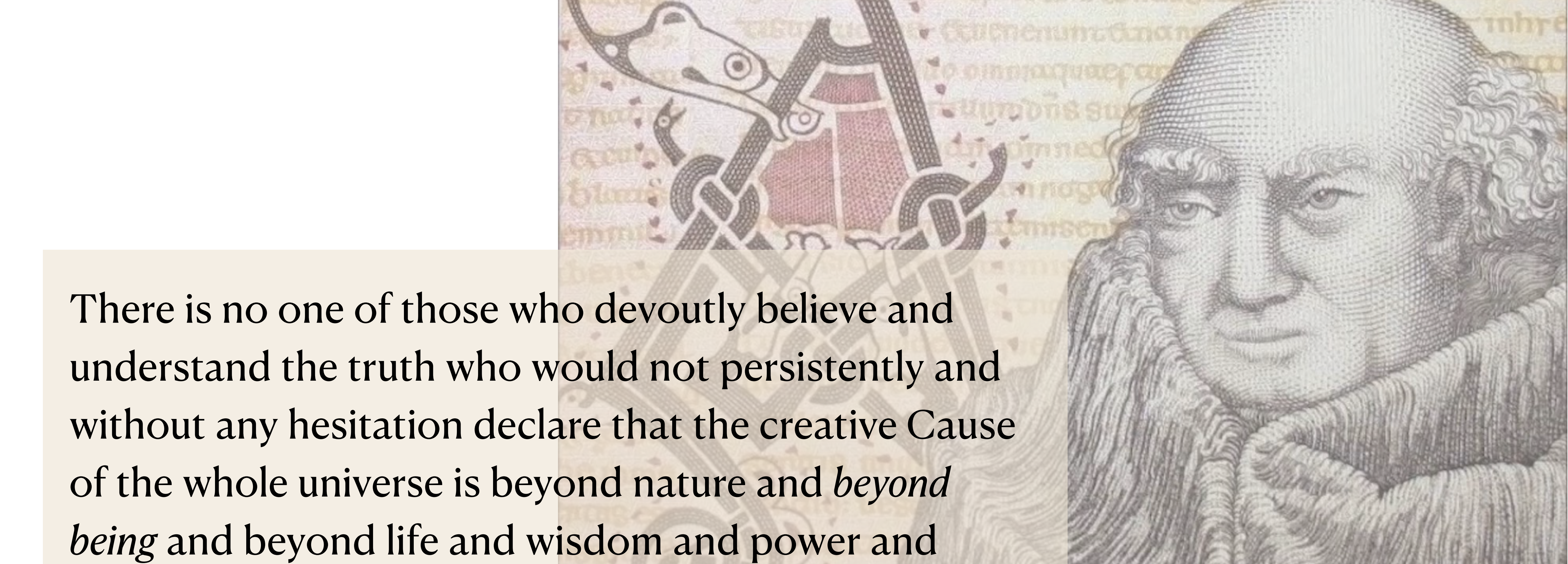
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The background is a composite image. On the left, there is a detail from a medieval manuscript showing a large, ornate initial letter 'A' in red and black, with a white snake-like creature coiled around it. The background of the manuscript page is filled with faint, golden text. On the right, there is a black and white engraving of a man's face, identified as John Scottus Eriugena, with a long, curly beard and hair, resting his chin on his hands.

There is no one of those who devoutly believe and understand the truth who would not persistently and without any hesitation declare that the creative Cause of the whole universe is beyond nature and *beyond being* and beyond life and wisdom and power and **beyond all things which are said and understood and perceived by any sense.**

John Scottus Eriugena
Periphyseon III 621D–622A

Our *concepts* do not apply to God.

Isn't *apophaticism*
self-refuting?

Either those who attempt to make this claim succeed in making an assertion or they do not.

If they don't succeed we have nothing to consider;

if they do, however, *they appear to be predicating a property of a being they have referred to, in which case at least some of our concepts do apply to it*, contrary to the claim they make.

So if they succeed in making a claim, they make a *false* claim.



Alvin Plantinga

Warranted Christian Belief, p. 20

What are we *doing*
when we talk about God?



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To talk of *God* is to talk of
whatever answers the question
***“why is there something
rather than nothing?”***

What *follows* from such
a conception of God?

To put the point in a grammatical register, we learned to use the word 'God' to designate whatever answers a certain kind of question. Reflecting on that use, we realise that many of the modes of speaking we customarily engage in with respect to the objects we encounter in everyday life, and through scientific enquiry, must be inapplicable to God.

We cannot say of God that God is a body, that God changes, or that God might not have existed. (Nor, on pain of incoherence, can we say anything that entails one of these statements – already it ought to be clear that swathes of everyday language is inapplicable to God.)

Simon Hewitt, *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis*,
p. 92, emphasis mine.



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Hewitt explores and defends a kind of *grammatical Thomism*.



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The view is *Thomist* in that he is committed to divine *simplicity, ineffability* and *transcendence*.



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It is *grammatical*, insofar as it is a work in *analytic philosophy*, in the original sense of that phrase.

Hewitt is concerned with language, meaning and concepts.



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I will focus on the **grammatical** side
of Simon's grammatical Thomism.



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*Inferentialism and
Representationalism*

Inferentialism

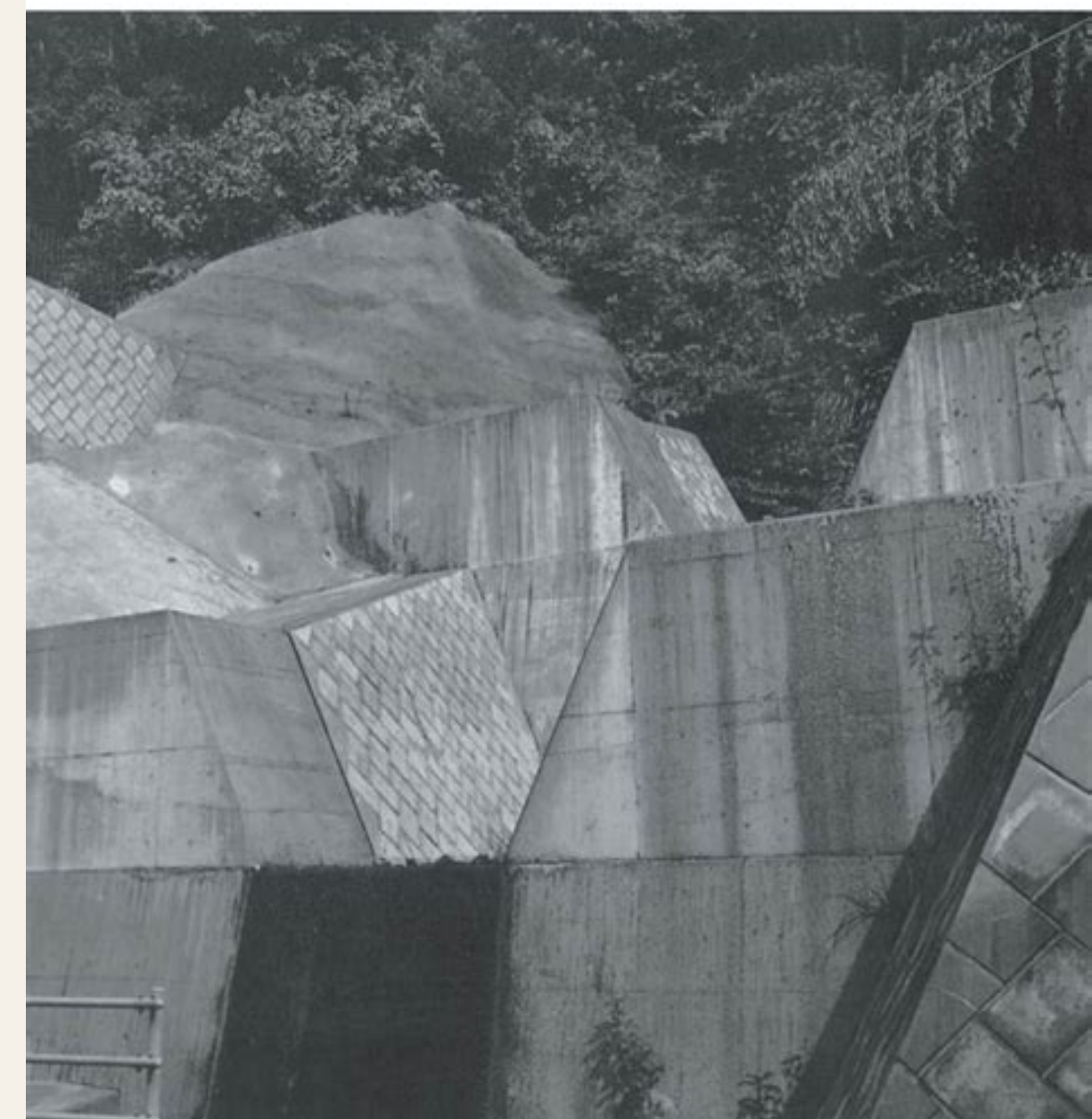
Conceptual *Platonism* or *Pragmatism*?



Robert B. Brandom

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Inferentialism

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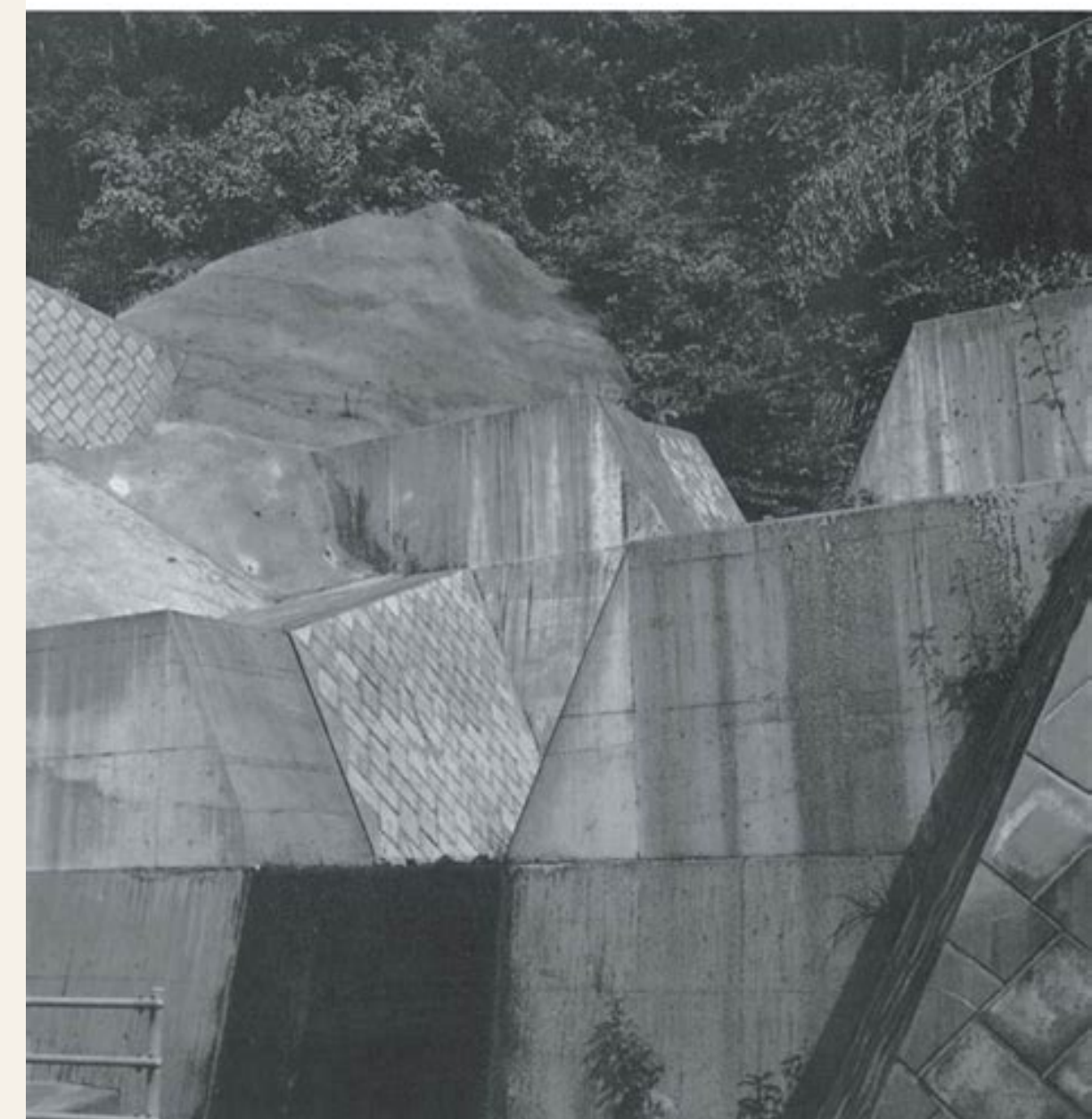
Are concepts best *characterised* by finding them in some unchanging world of abstract ideas, or in terms of the things we *do* with them?



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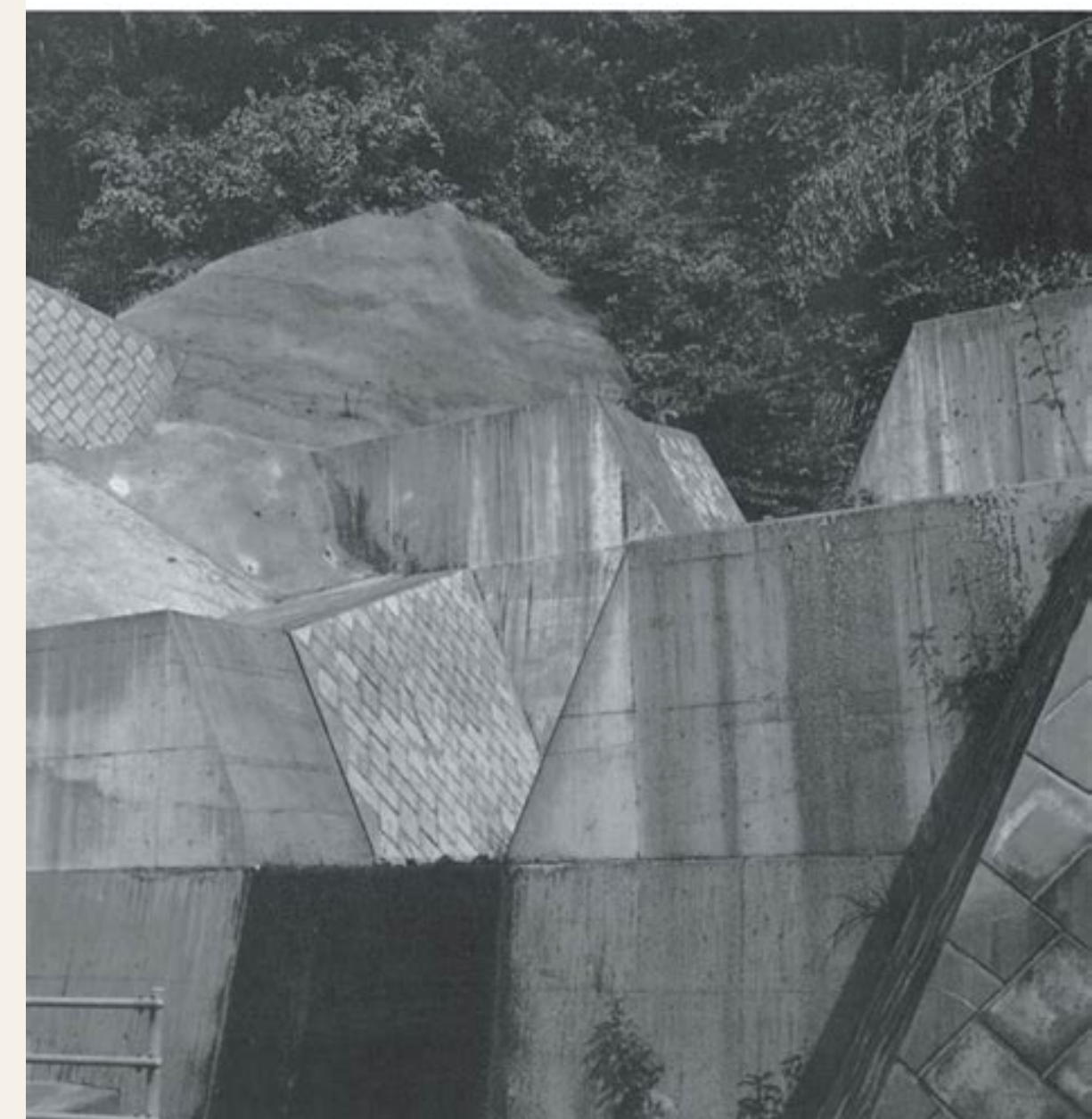
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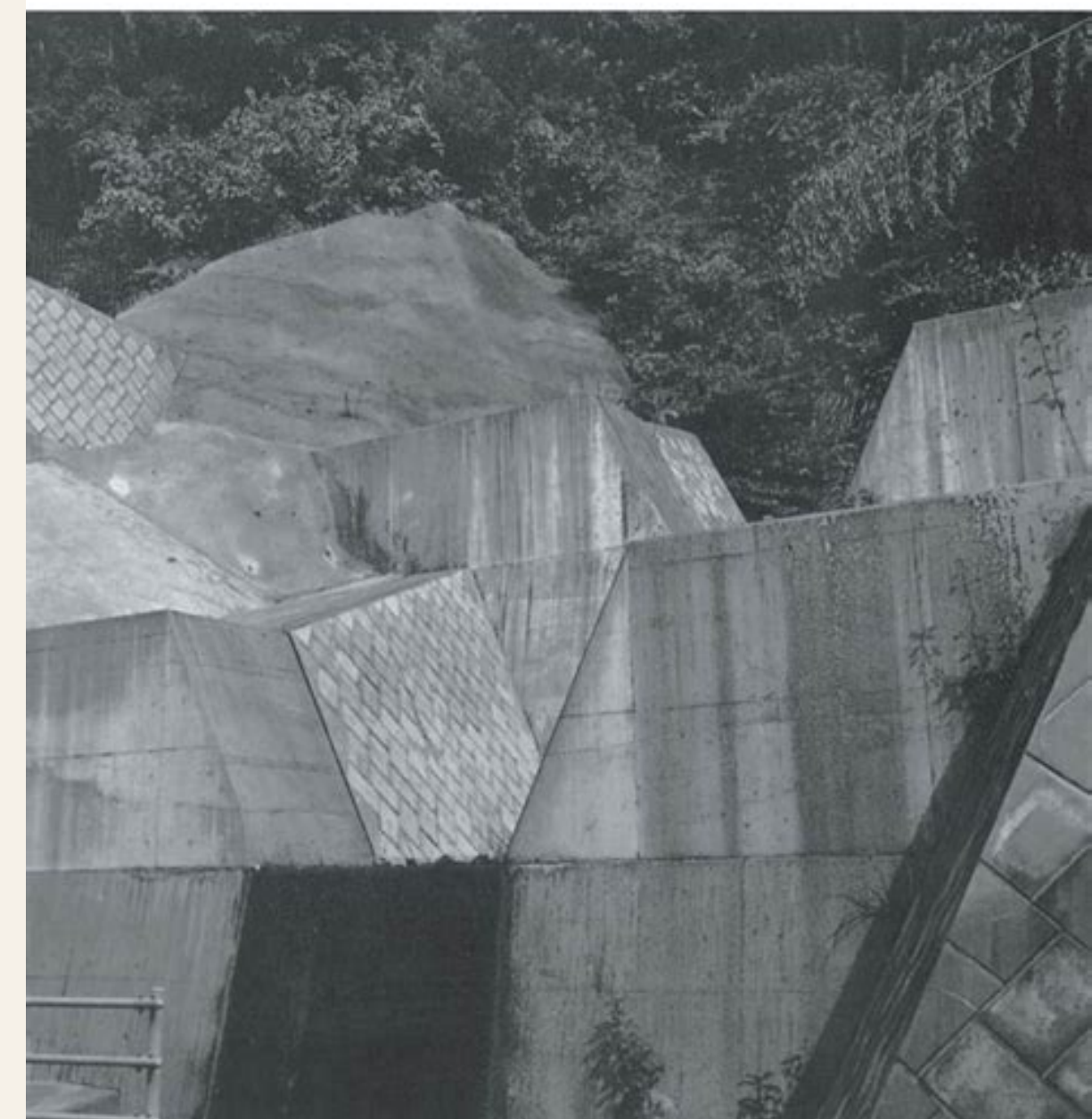
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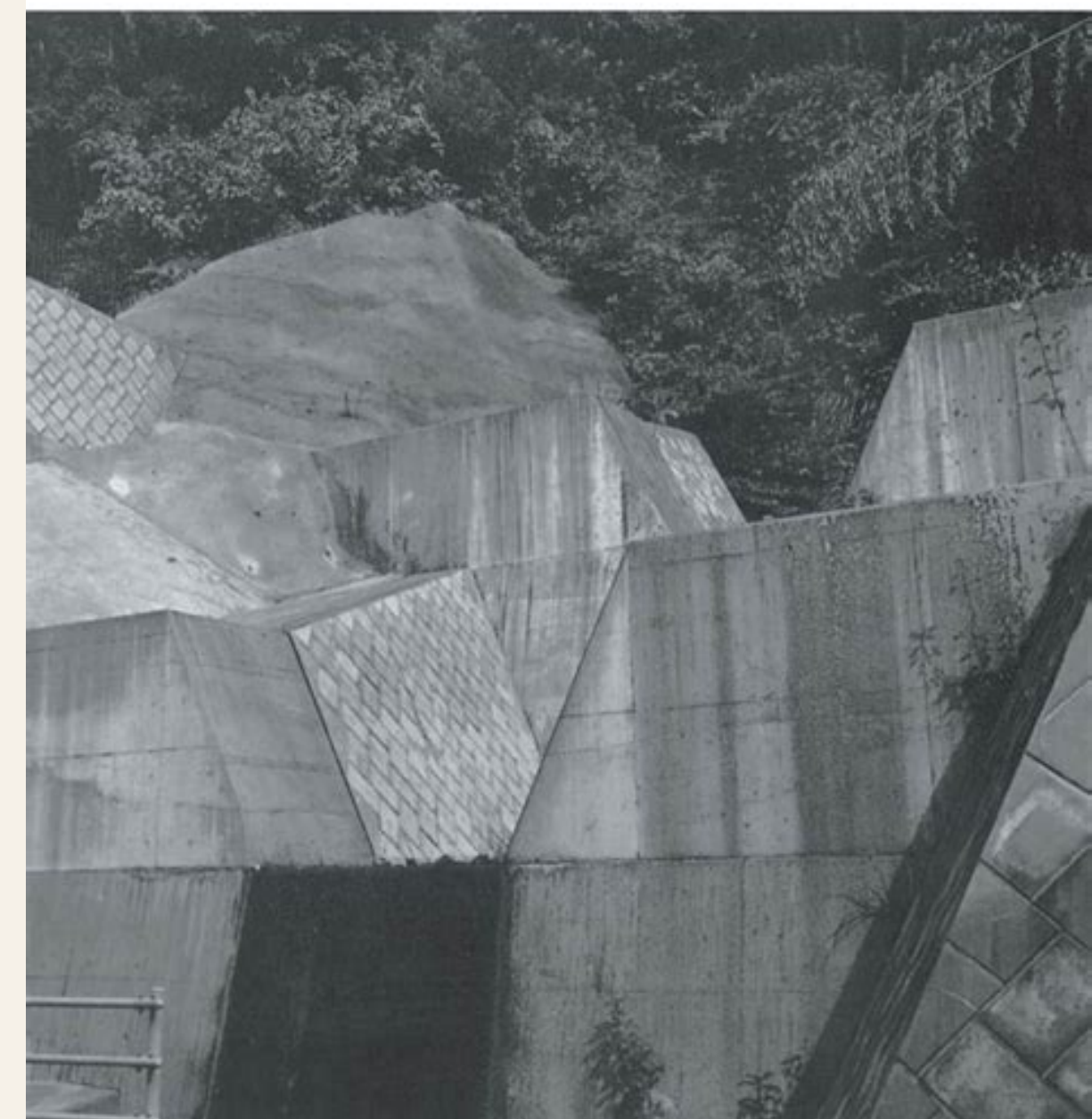
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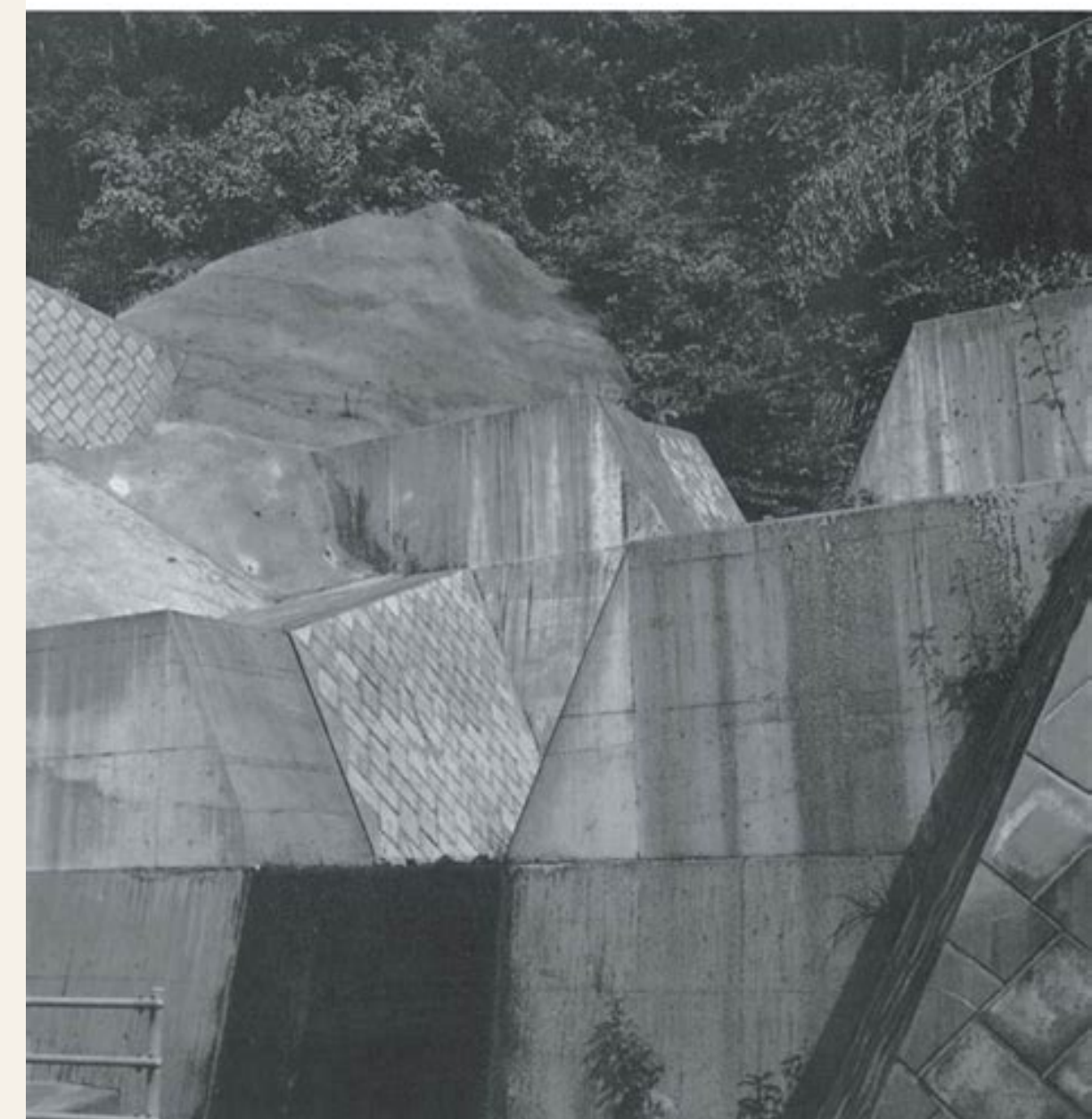
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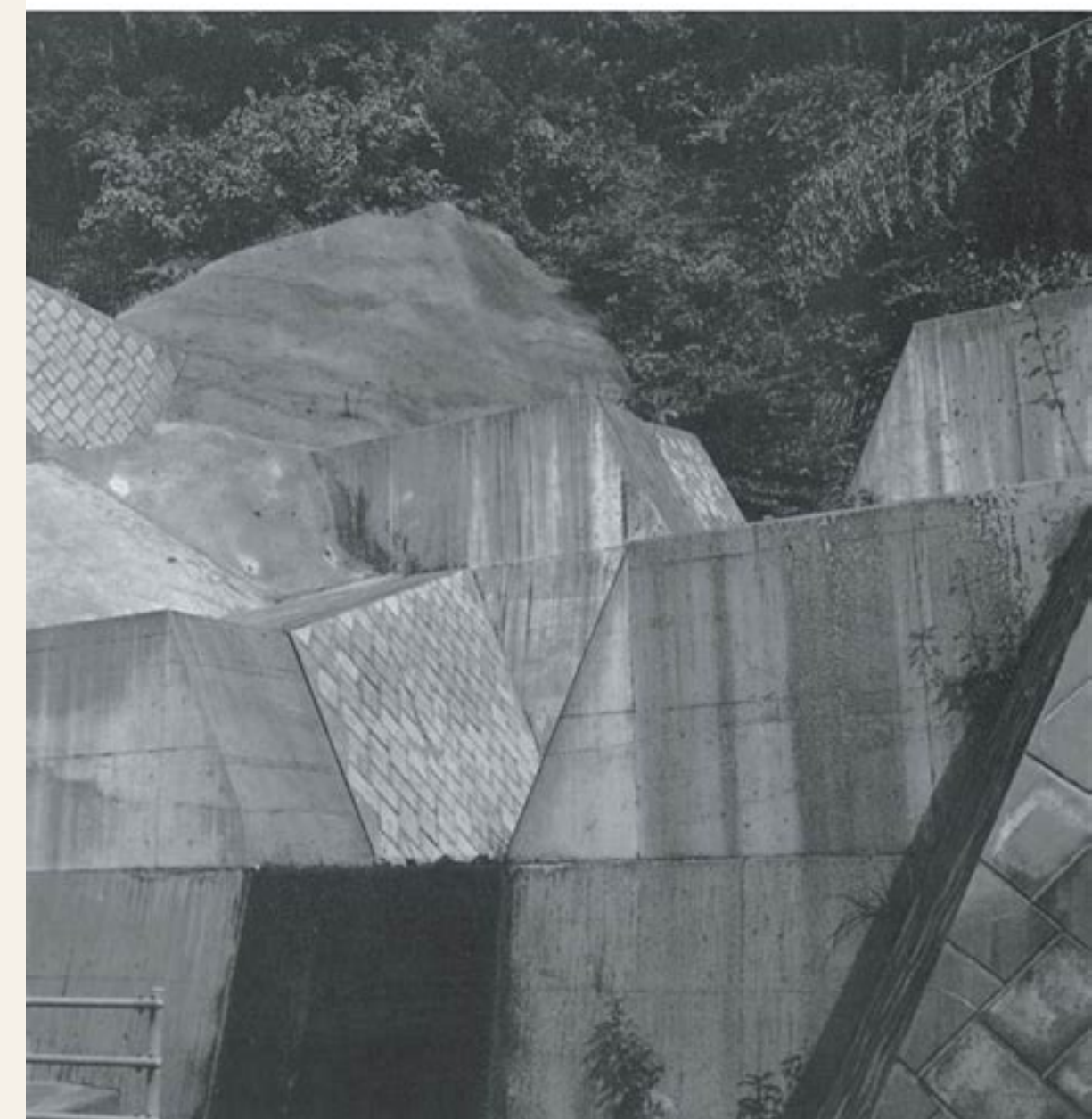
Representation or *Expression*?



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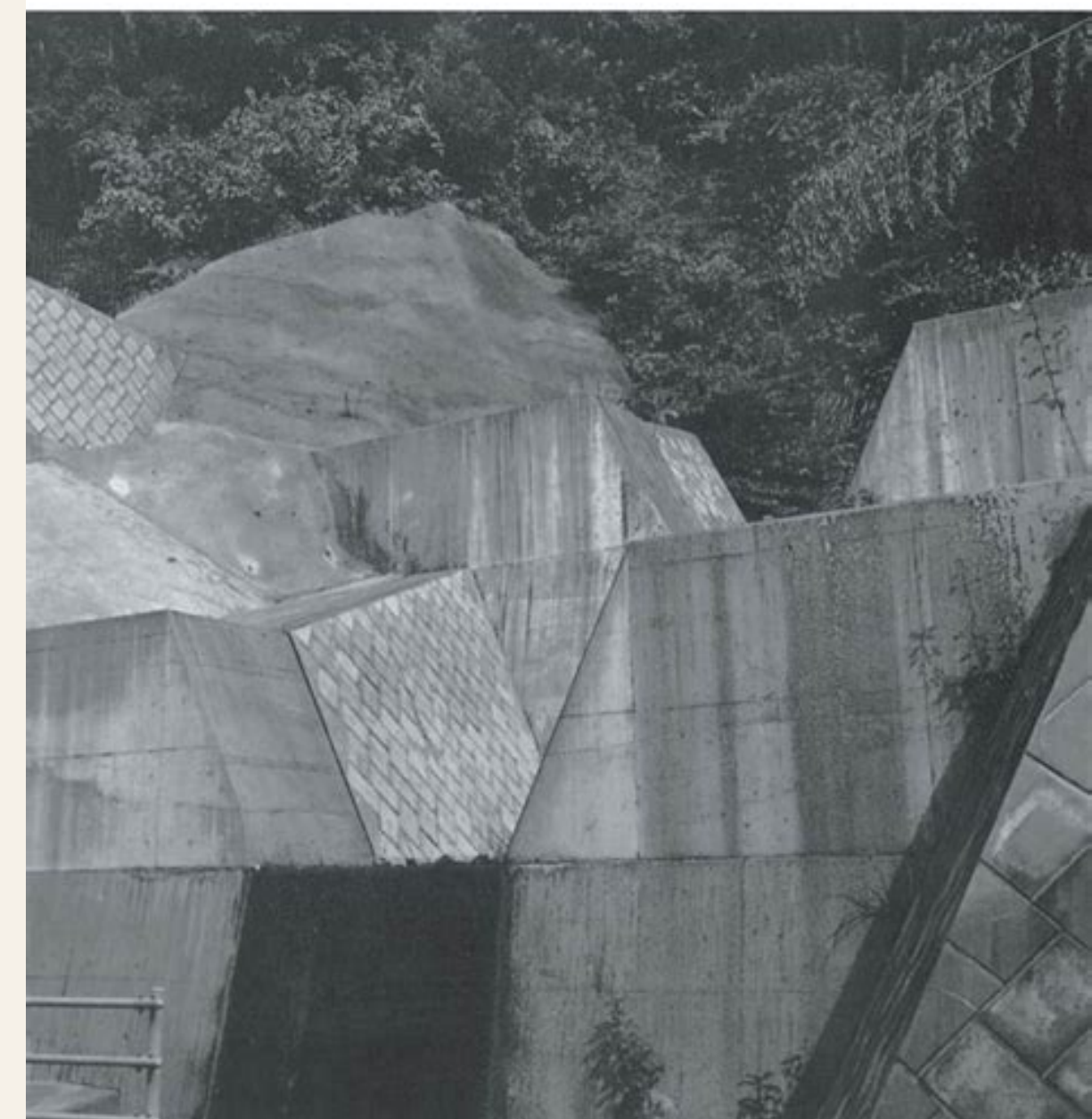
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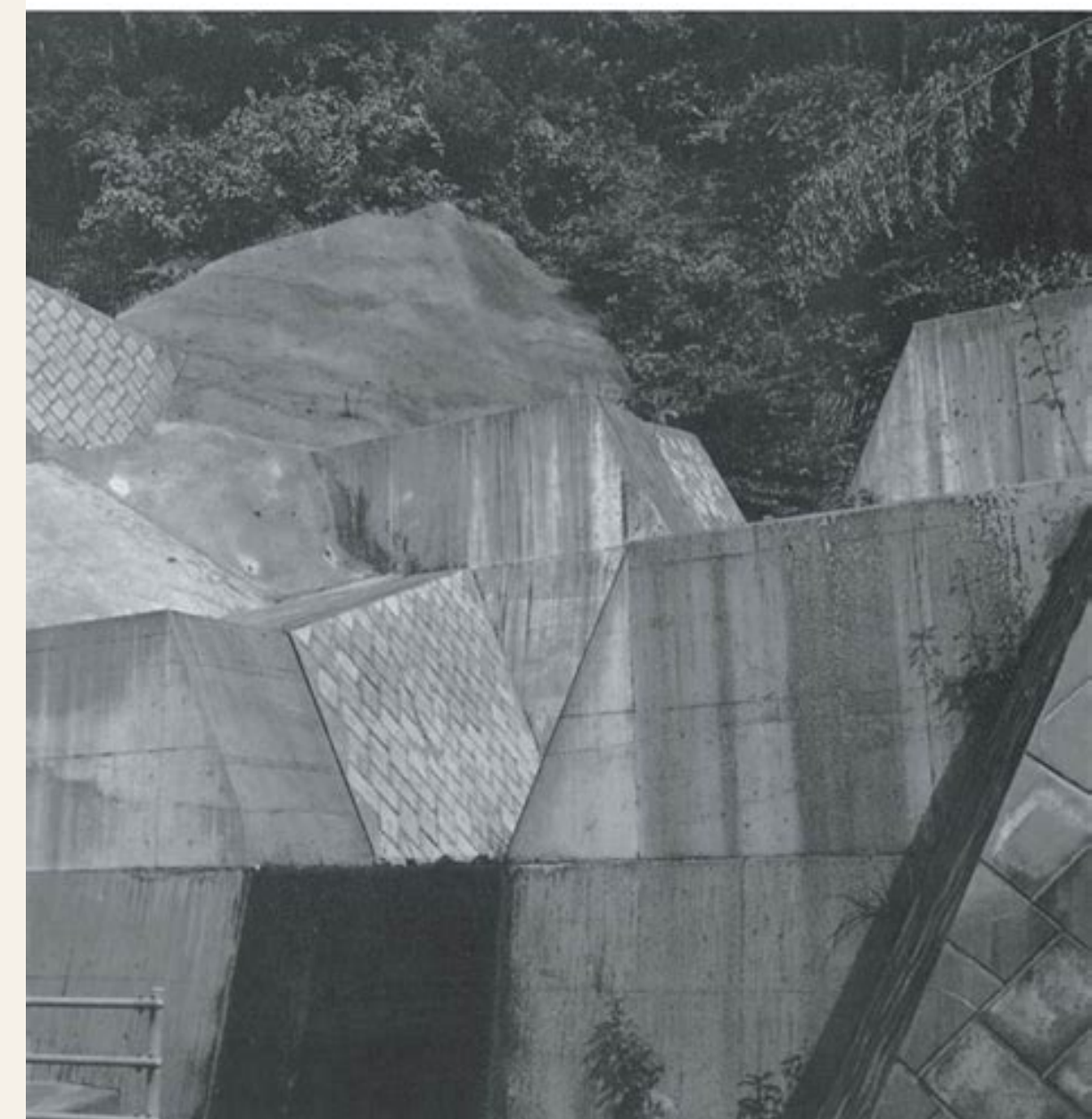
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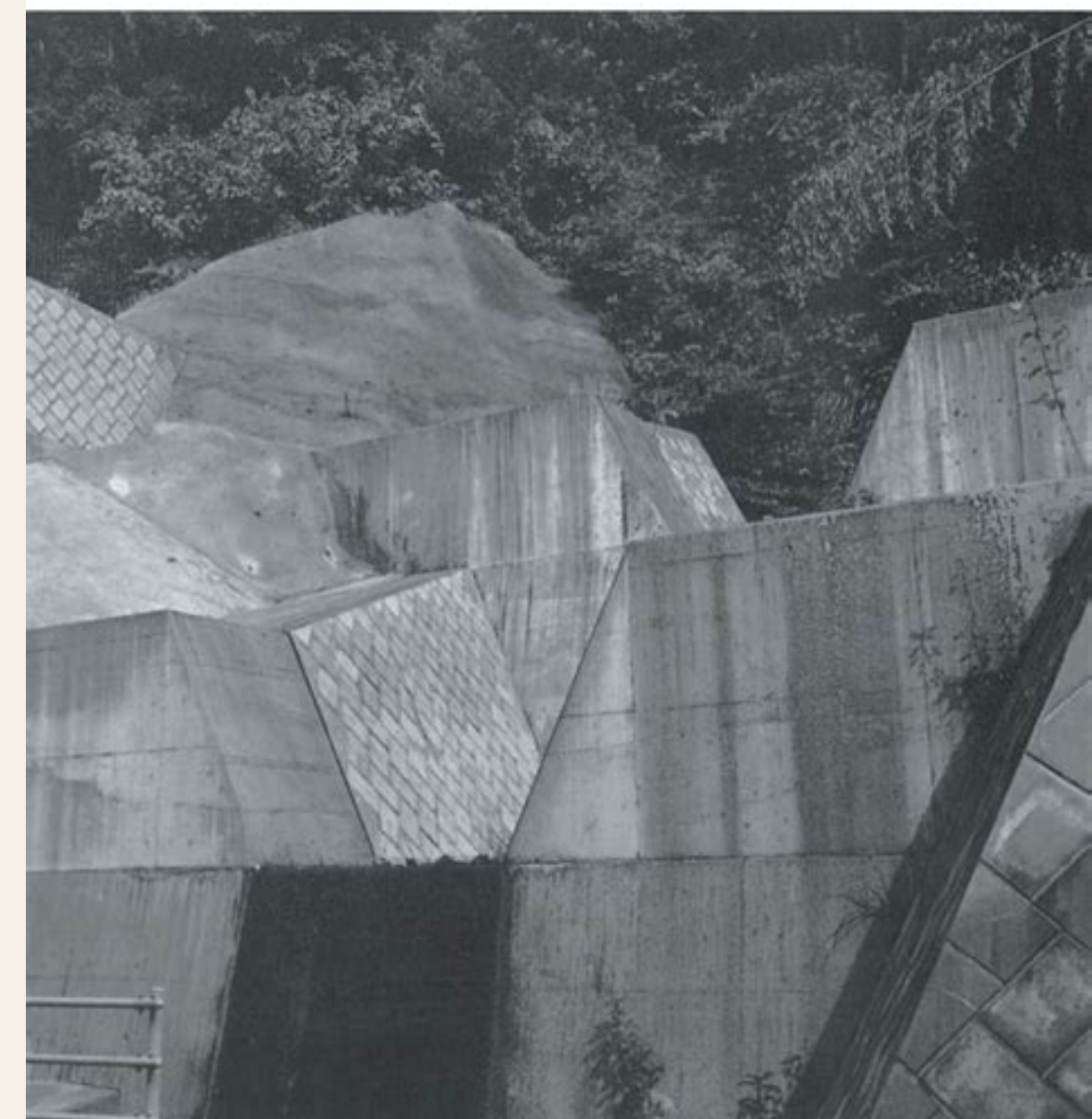
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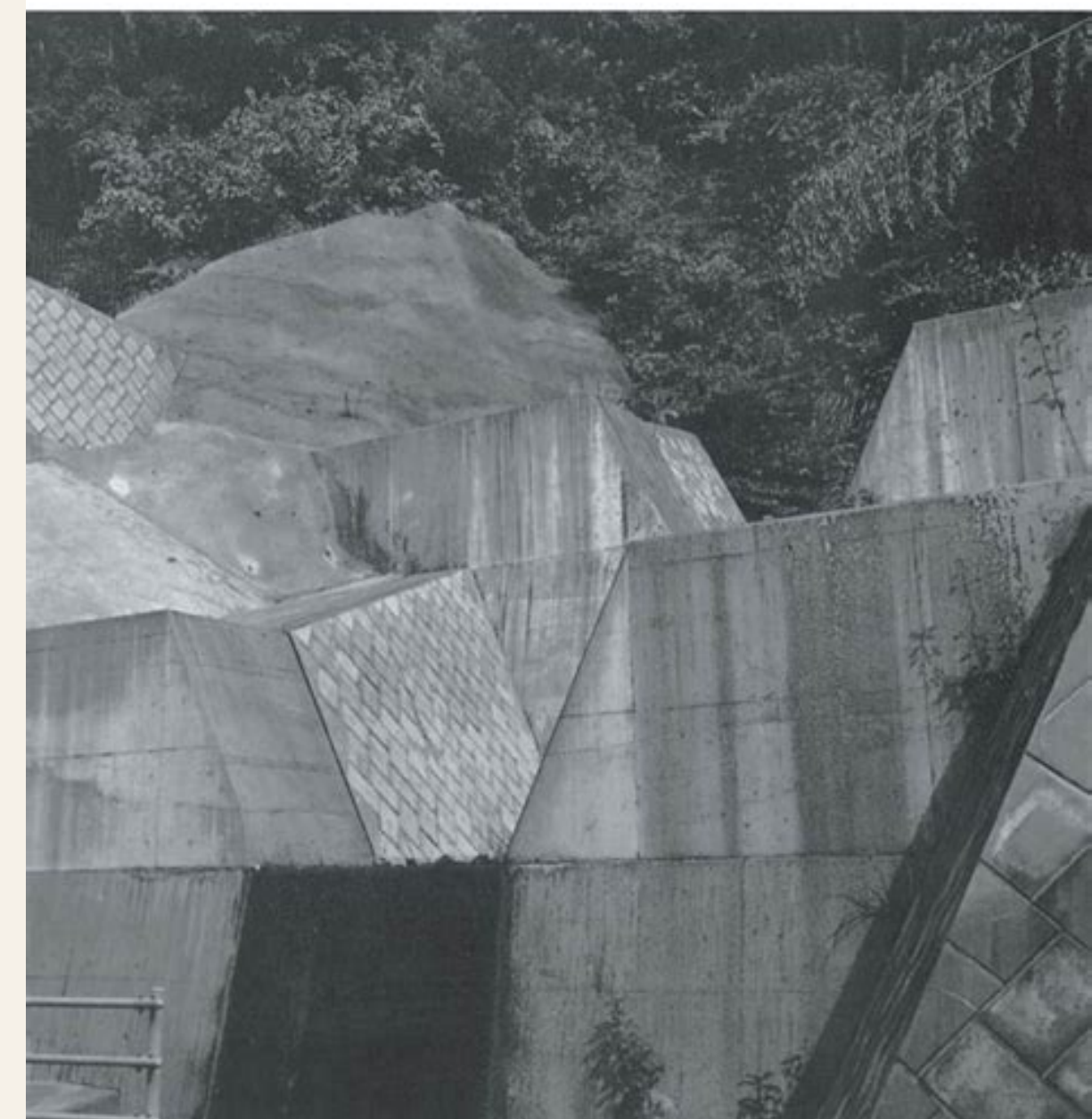
Can we isolate the meaning of a concept independently of the meanings of other connected concepts?



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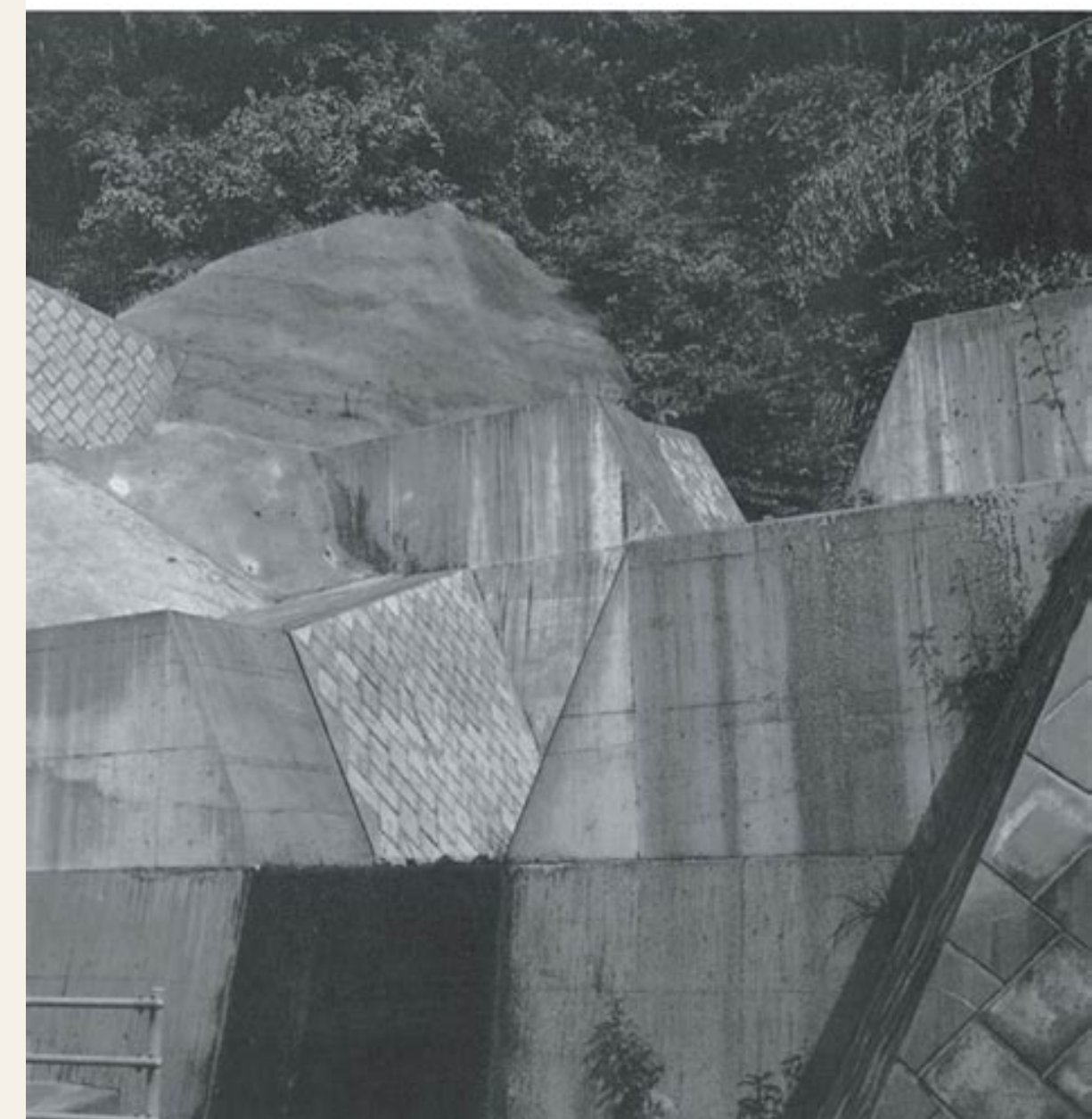
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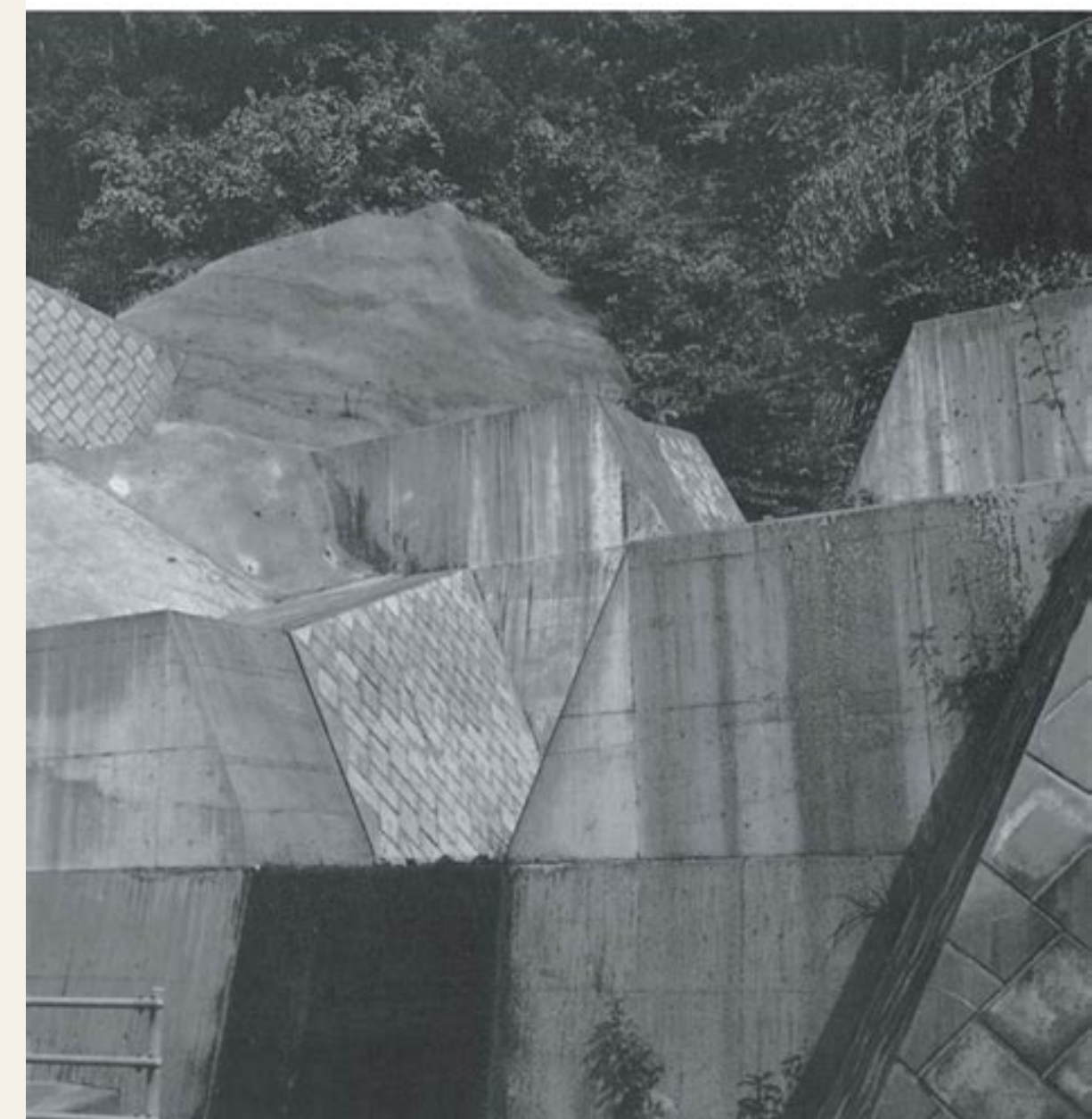
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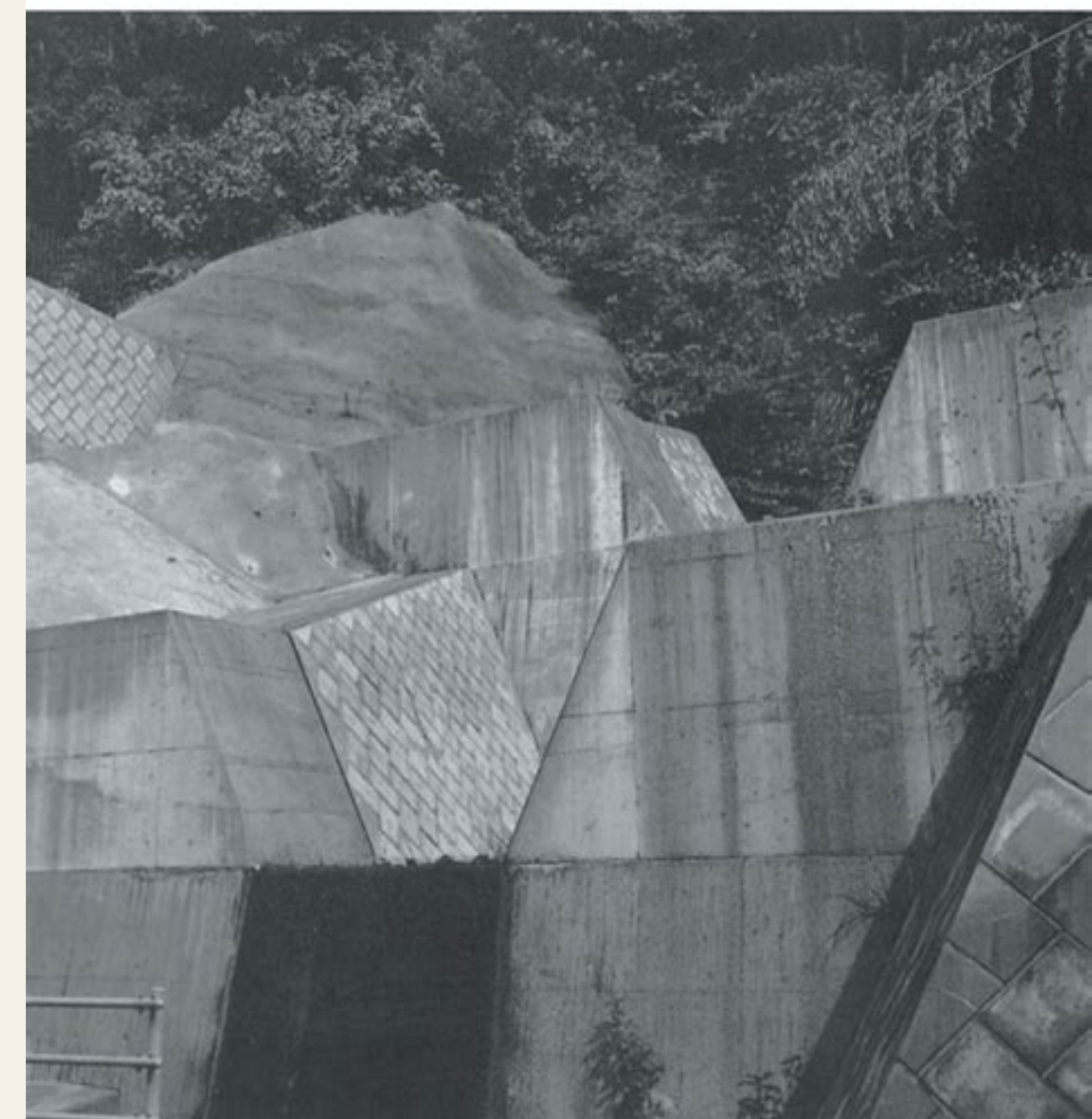
Since Hewitt does not take **representationalism** for granted, he has many options for how to understand the semantics of **God** talk.



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ARTICULATING REASONS

An Introduction to Inferentialism





Radical interpretation



Radical interpretation

Imagine coming across a different linguistic community, using words and concepts you don't understand.

What do you *do* to figure out what they mean?

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What do you *do* to figure out what they mean?

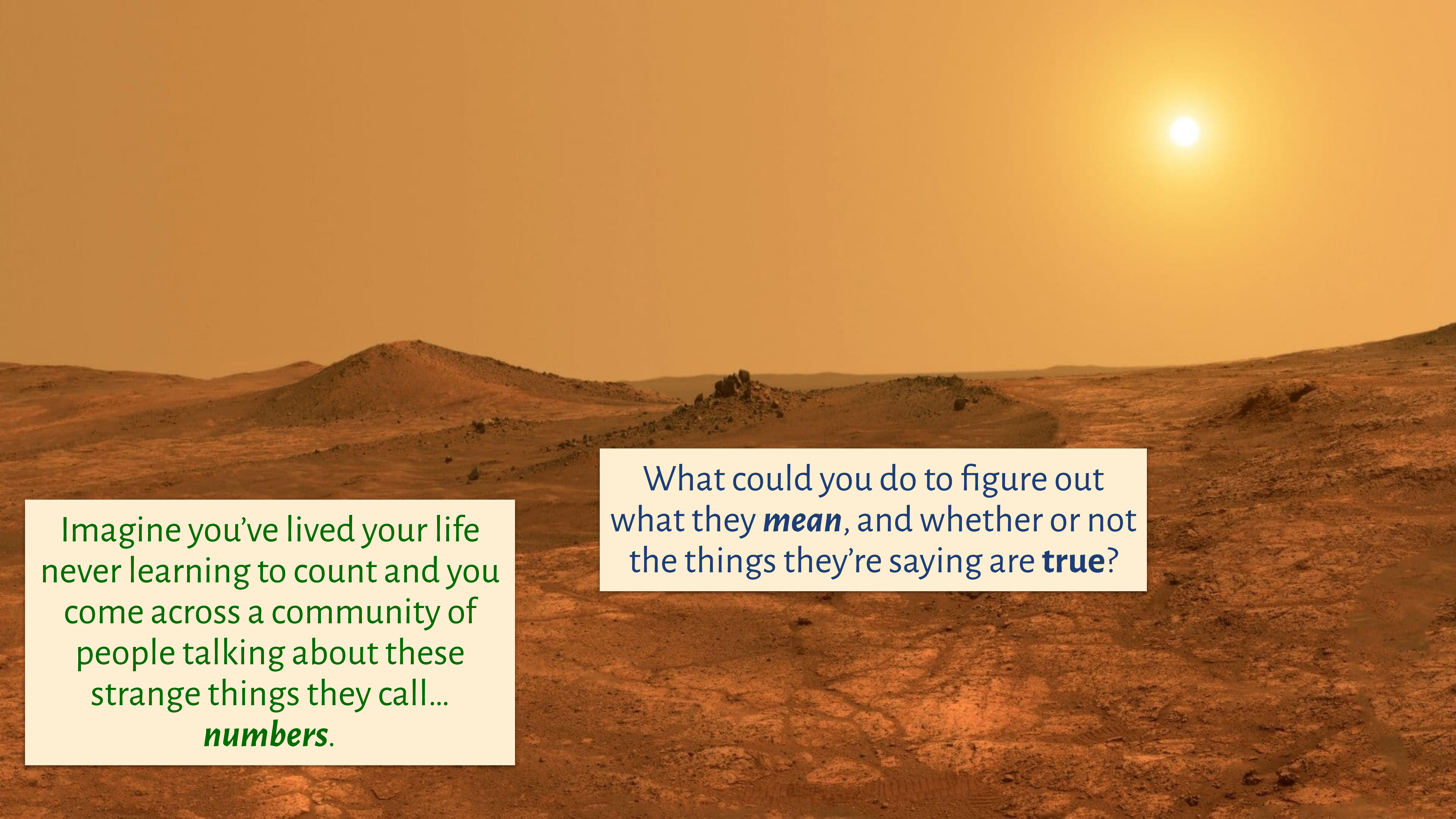
It will help to have a *range* of ways of understanding **meaning**.

*Example: introducing
number talk*






Imagine you've lived your life
never learning to count and you
come across a community of
people talking about these
strange things they call...
numbers.



Imagine you've lived your life
never learning to count and you
come across a community of
people talking about these
strange things they call...
numbers.

What could you do to figure out
what they *mean*, and whether or not
the things they're saying are **true**?



Imagine you've lived your life
never learning to count and you
come across a community of
people talking about these
strange things they call...
numbers.

What could you do to figure out
what they *mean*, and whether or not
the things they're saying are **true**?

Do you need to first decide what
objects numbers are, in order to
understand them?



I don't think so.

Maybe the people who use the number words don't *agree* on what numbers are, or don't *care*.

Imagine you've lived your life never learning to count and you come across a community of people talking about these strange things they call...
numbers.

What could you do to figure out what they ***mean***, and whether or not the things they're saying are **true**?

Do you need to first decide what ***objects*** numbers are, in order to understand them?

I don't think so.

Maybe the people who use the number words don't *agree* on what they mean, but they don't *care*.

You can learn what the number words **mean** by learning how to ***count***.

Imagine you've lived your whole life never learning to count and you come across a community of people talking about these strange things they call... ***numbers***.

and the things they're saying are true.

Do you need to first decide what ***objects*** numbers are, in order to understand them?

Numbers 1-10

1

one



6

six



2

two



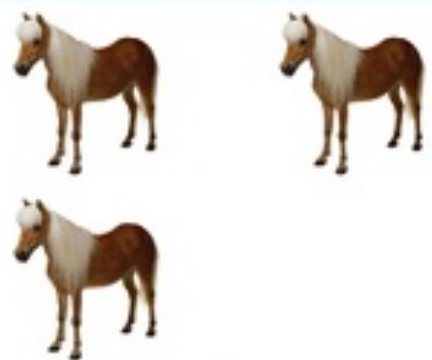
7

seven



3

three



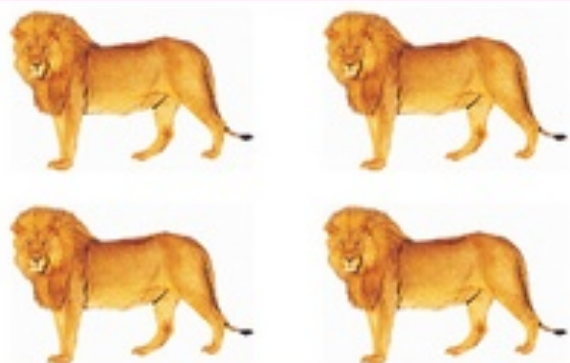
8

eight



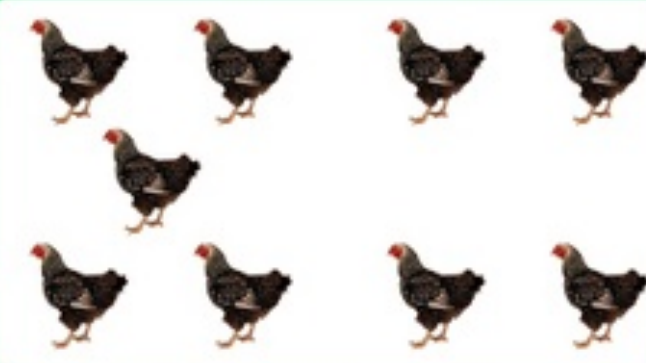
4

four



9

nine



5

five



10

ten



They learn to *count*
by associating
number words with
collections of
everyday things.

After a while, they notice that they can associate number words with anything at all — *even the numbers themselves!*

15 23
 82
124 35
 6

After a while, they notice that they can associate number words with anything at all — *even the numbers themselves!*

15 23
 82
124 35
 6

Three of these numbers are even.

They treat number
words like names for
things, just like you
(and they) use other
names or descriptions.

They treat number words like names for things, just like you (and they) use other names or descriptions.

There *are* two different prime numbers between 3 and 10.

They treat number words like names for things, just like you (and they) use other names or descriptions.

There *are* two different prime numbers between 3 and 10.

There *is no* largest number, since for any number, we can *add one* to it, to get an even larger number.

They tend to *not* say things like
“seven is happy” or “numbers are green”.

It’s like they have introduced words for
a different category of thing.

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“seven is happy” or “numbers are green”.

It’s like they have introduced words for
a different category of thing.

And, it looks like they did all this
without ever *first* worrying about
whether the numbers they are
talking about really **exist**.

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“seven is happy” or “numbers are green”.

It’s like they have introduced words for
a different category of thing.

And, it looks like they did all this
without ever *first* worrying about
whether the numbers they are
talking about really **exist**.

If you ask them, do numbers *really exist*, they
might look at you strangely. But they’ll agree
that *there is* a number between 5 and 7, and that
there is no even prime number other than 2.

Imagine someone who got hung up
on the *real existence* of numbers.

“Give me **evidence** that these ‘numbers’ **exist**.
All I see are the things you’re counting. I don’t
see any **numbers**. I won’t count until you prove
to me that numbers **really exist**.”

I think they might be missing
the **point** of number talk.

And, it looks like they’re
without ever finding out
whether the numbers they are
talking about really **exist**.

that *there is* a number between 5 and 7, and that
there is no even prime number other than 2.

ly exist, they
they’ll agree

You, the observer, can see that they can *do* many different things with their number words.

(They use them to help keep track of things, *in trade, in problem solving, and more...*)

You, the observer, now have a choice.

You can decide to *adopt* their vocabulary,
and join them in their number talk.

Or you can remain a detached
observer of their practice.

As an observer, we've accounted for
their practice as an *inferentialist*:

Conceptual **Pragmatism**, *not Platonism*.

Language first, and then *Mind*.

*Representation only via **Expression***.

*Not Atomism but **Holism***.

But hang on: doesn't such a pragmatic *contingent-on-human-interest* account of arithmetic mean that numbers are merely a ***human construction***?

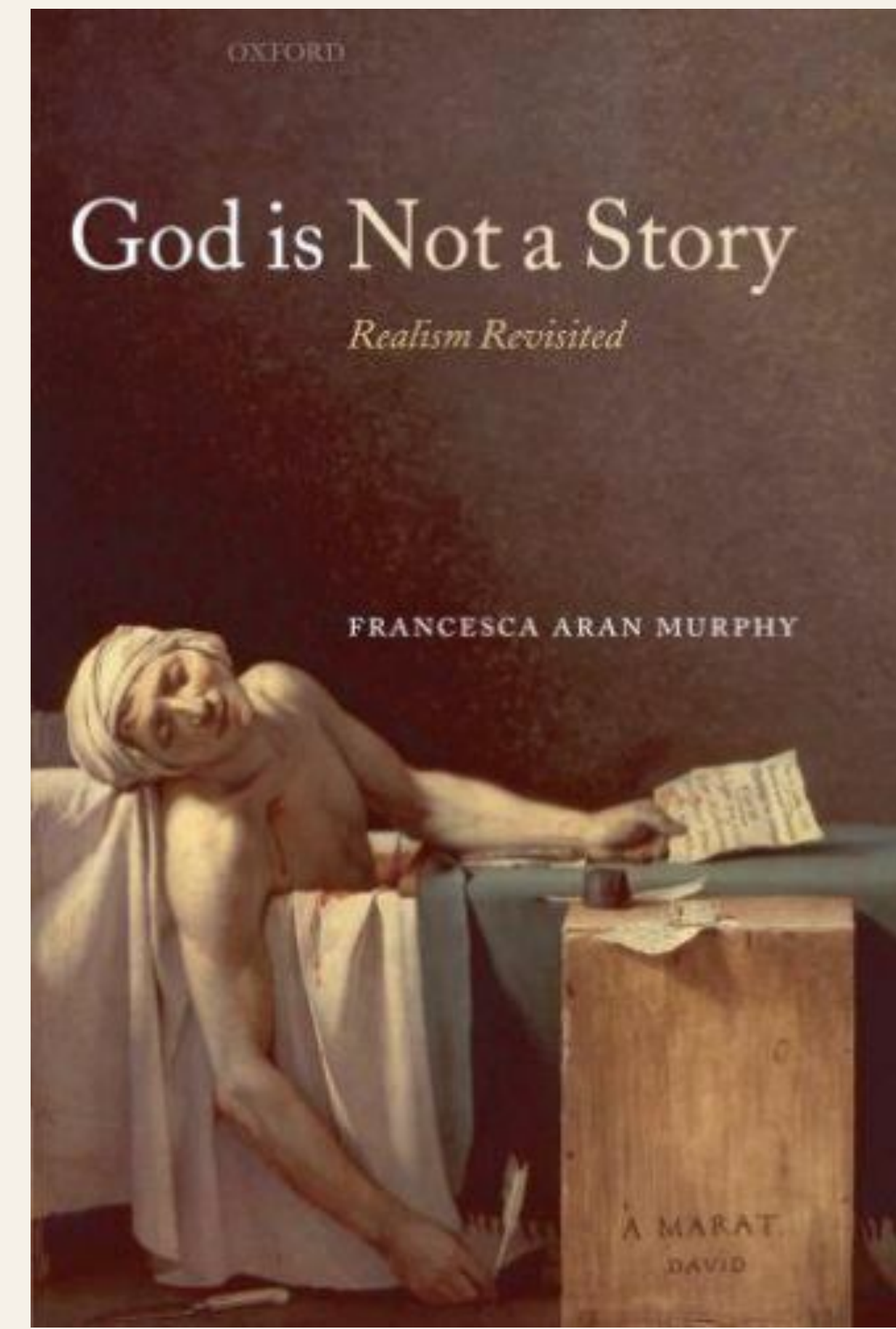
Arithmetic doesn't seem like it is just up to *me*
— or to anyone else.

Don't we *discover* things about the numbers?



Our objection to grammatical arguments for God is that the priority of the narrative method entails either that storytelling itself becomes the foundation upon which God stands, or else that story itself is the wider concept which contains the idea of God.

Francesca Aran Murphy,
God is Not a Story, p. 93



Isn't a grammatical "language first"
account of negative theology *placing*
the grammar before God?

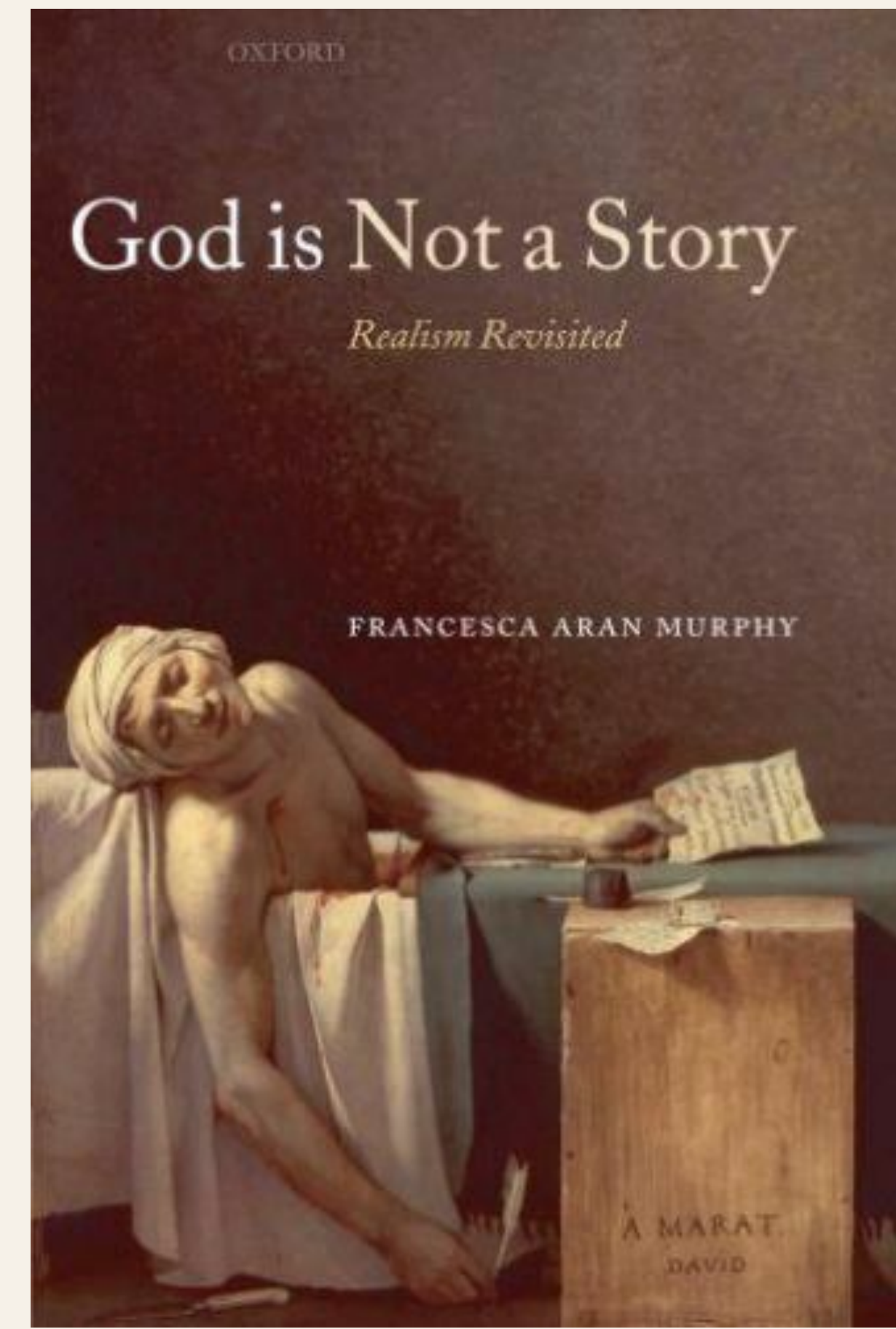


Our objection to grammatical arguments for God is that the priority of the narrative method entails either that storytelling itself becomes the foundation **upon which God stands**, or else that story itself is the wider concept which contains **the idea of God**.

Francesca Aran Murphy,
God is Not a Story, p. 93

Notice the difference between talking about **God** and talking about **the idea of God**.

We'll see that this equivocation is insignificant.



*Sense Dependence
& Reference Dependence*

Here are two ways to understand *dependence* and *contingency*.



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The **concept *dinosaur*** is a human construction. It depends on *us*, on our classification choices, discoveries, etc.



Here are two ways to understand *dependence* and *contingency*.

The **concept *dinosaur*** is a human construction. It depends on *us*, on our classification choices, discoveries, etc.

Dinosaurs existed before humans. Dinosaurs didn't depend on us for their existence.



Concept *P* is *sense dependent* on concept *Q* just in case one cannot count as having grasped *P* unless one counts as grasping *Q*. (Brandom, *TotMD* p. 194)

Concept *P* is *reference dependent* on concept *Q* just in case *P* cannot apply to something unless *Q* applies to something. (Brandom, *TotMD* p. 195)



Tales of
the Mighty
Dead

Historical Essays
in the Metaphysics
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ROBERT B. BRANDOM

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The **concept *dinosaur*** is *sense dependent* on a whole lot of other human classification concepts.



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The **concept *dinosaur*** is *sense dependent* on a whole lot of other human classification concepts.

The **concept *dinosaur*** is *not reference dependent* on anything human.



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Even if the concept *nail* is sense dependent on the concept *hammer*,

it would not follow that it was impossible for there to **be** nails without there being hammers to drive them.

(Maybe the nails were invented first, or all the hammers were destroyed.)

(Brandom, *TotMD*, p. 195)



Numbers 1-10

1

one



6

six



2

two



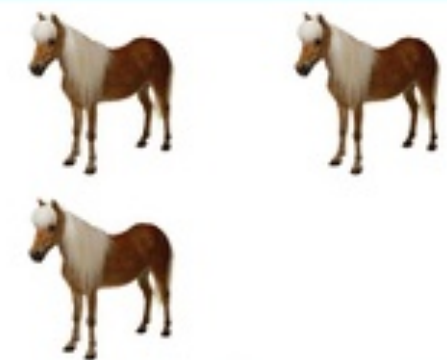
7

seven



3

three



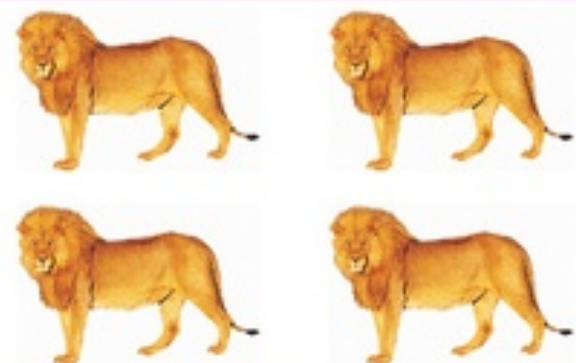
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eight



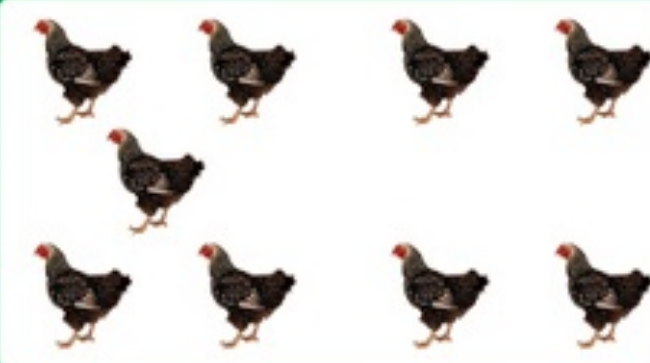
4

four



9

nine



5

five



10

ten



Number concepts are sense dependent on our contingent *counting* practices.

Numbers 1-10

1

one



6

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2

two



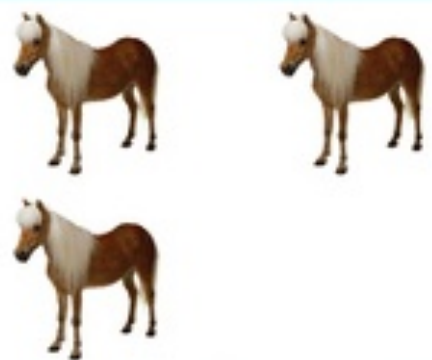
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3

three



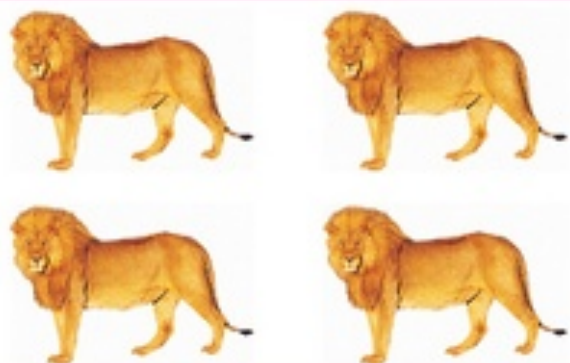
8

eight



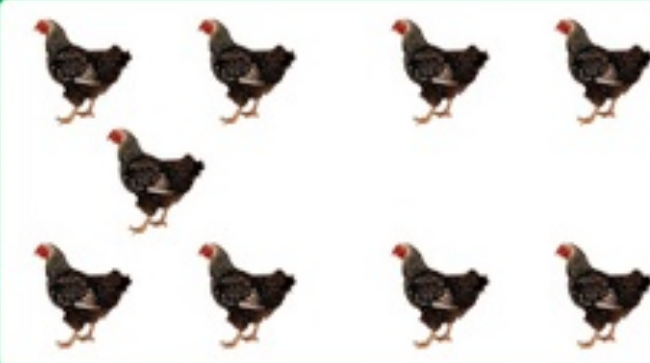
4

four



9

nine



5

five



10

ten



Number concepts are sense dependent on our contingent *counting* practices.

Number concepts are *not* reference dependent on anything human.

Numbers 1-10

1

one



6

six



2

two



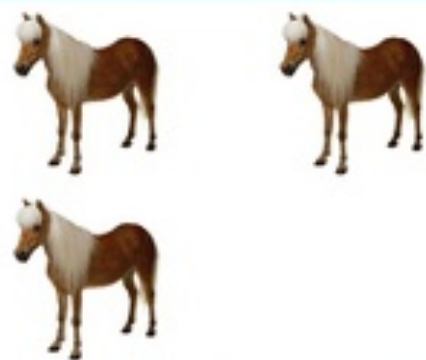
7

seven



3

three



8

eight



4

four



9

nine



5

five



10

ten



Number concepts are sense dependent on our contingent *counting* practices.

Number concepts are *not* reference dependent on anything human.

If *three* dinosaurs leave a pack of *seven* (and there is no other change), then there are *four* remaining in the pack.

We take our *number* concepts to apply in circumstances without us, just like our other concepts.

We *designed* them that way.

Numbers 1-10

1

one



6

six



2

two



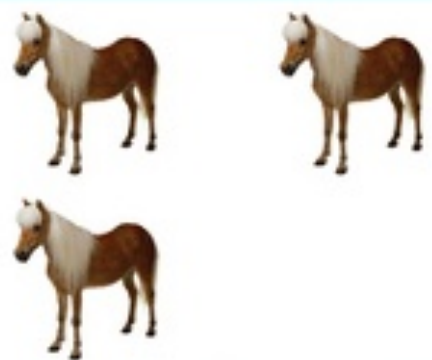
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seven



3

three



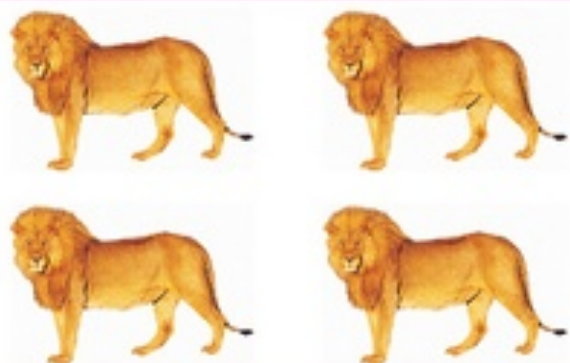
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eight



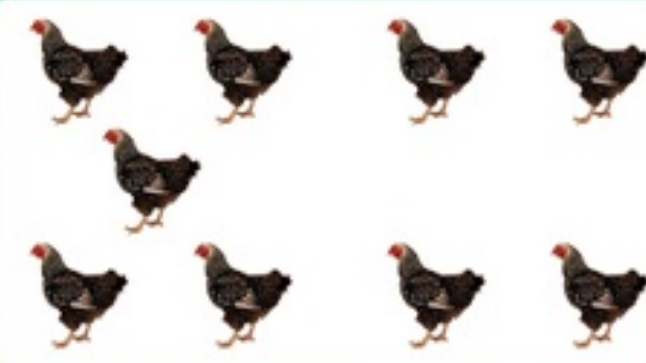
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four



9

nine



5

five



10

ten



In fact, it seems like our number-talk is *reference independent* of any contingent reality.

Numbers 1-10

1

one

6

six

2

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seven

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three

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10

ten

In fact, it seems like our number-talk is *reference independent* of any contingent reality.

Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

Numbers 1-10

1

one

6

six

2

two

7

seven

3

three

8

eight

4

four

9

nine

5

five

10

ten

In fact, it seems like our number-talk is *reference independent* of any contingent reality.

Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

Count all the contingent things:
Call the number of those things *zero*.

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

2

two

7

seven

3

three

8

eight

4

four

9

nine

5

five

10

ten

In fact, it seems like our number-talk is *reference independent* of any contingent reality.

Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

Count all the contingent things:
Call the number of those things *zero*.

Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

2

two

0, 1

7

seven

3

three

8

eight

4

four

9

nine

5

five

10

ten

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Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

Count all the contingent things:
Call the number of those things *zero*.

Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {*zero, one*}.
Call that number *two*..

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

2

two

0, 1

7

seven

3

three

0, 1, 2

8

eight

4

four

9

nine

5

five

10

ten

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Count all the contingent things:
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Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {*zero, one*}.
Call that number *two*..

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

2

two

0, 1

7

seven

3

three

0, 1, 2

8

eight

4

four

0, 1, 2, 3

9

nine

5

five

10

ten

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Count all the contingent things:
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Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {*zero, one*}.
Call that number *two*..

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

2

two

0, 1

7

seven

3

three

0, 1, 2

8

eight

4

four

0, 1, 2, 3

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nine

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Count all the contingent things:
Call the number of those things *zero*.

Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {*zero, one*}.
Call that number *two*..

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

2

two

0, 1

7

seven

0, 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6

3

three

0, 1, 2

8

eight

0, 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6, 7

4

four

0, 1, 2, 3

9

nine

0, 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6, 7, 8

5

five

0, 1, 2, 3, 4

10

ten

0, 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6, 7, 8, 9

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Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

Count all the contingent things:
Call the number of those things *zero*.

Consider the collection {*zero*}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {*zero, one*}.
Call that number *two*..

Numbers 1-10

1

one

0

6

six

0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

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two

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3

three

0, 1, 2

4

four

0, 1, 2, 3

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10

ten

0, 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6, 7, 8, 9

In fact, it seems like our number-talk is *reference independent* of any contingent reality.

Suppose that *nothing* contingent exists.

The number *concepts* are a human construction, but they are *designed* to apply to circumstances independent of *us*.

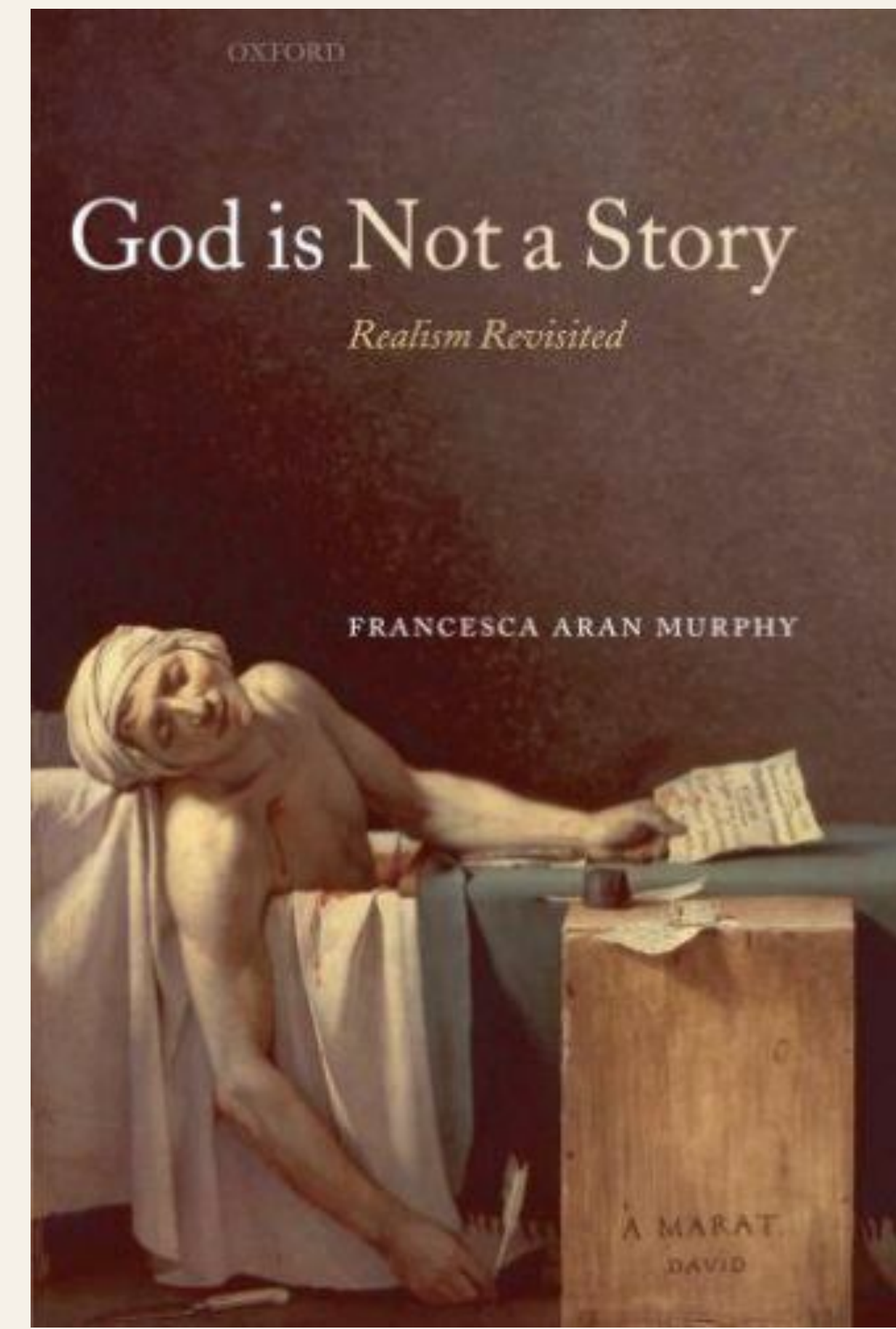
Consider the collection {zero}.
Call that number *one*.

Consider the collection {zero, one}.
Call that number *two*..



Our objection to grammatical arguments for God is that the priority of the narrative method entails either that storytelling itself becomes the foundation **upon which God stands**, or else that story itself is the wider concept which contains **the idea of God**.

Francesca Aran Murphy,
God is Not a Story, p. 93

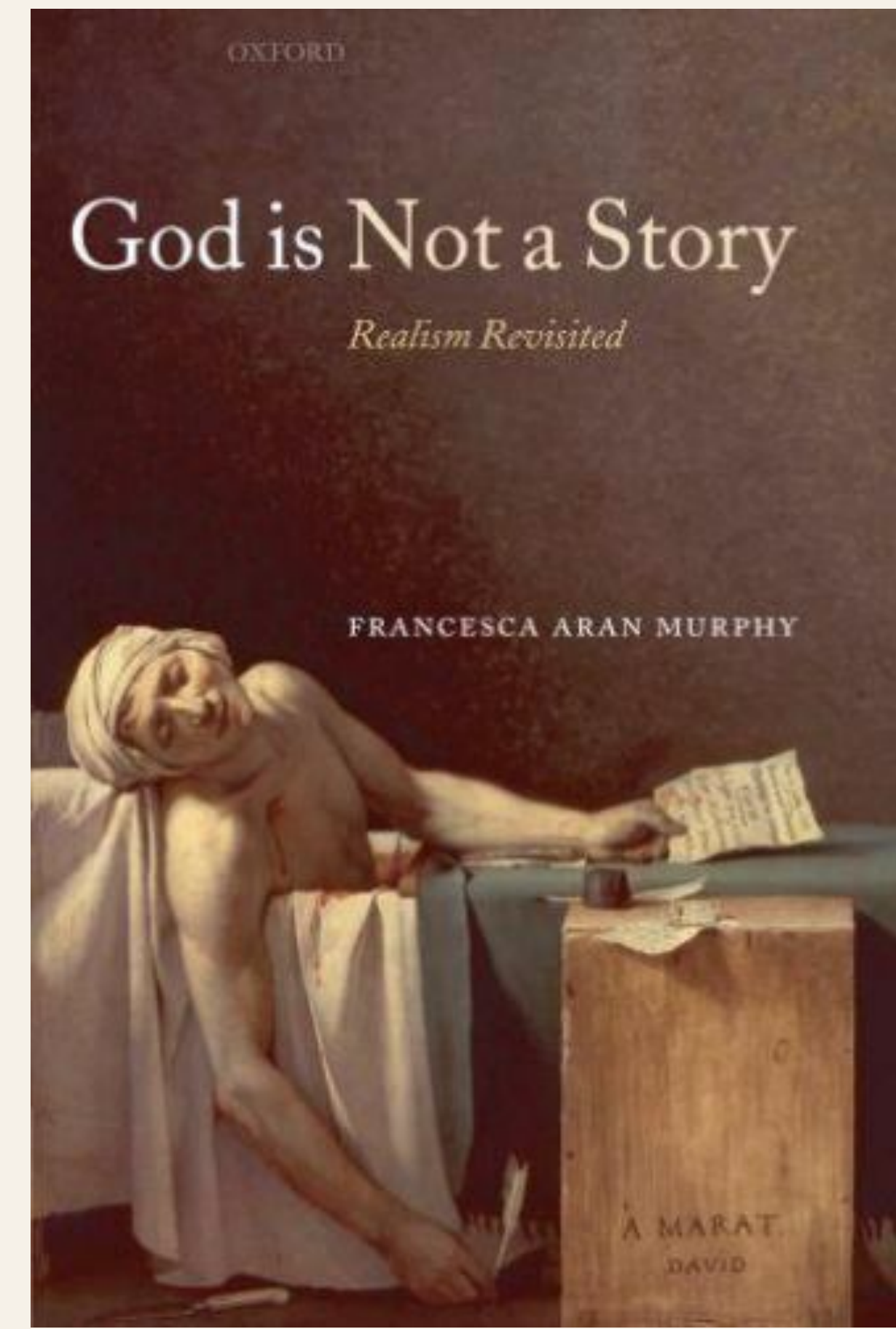




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The **concept God** may well be *sense dependent* on a whole lot of other human concepts.



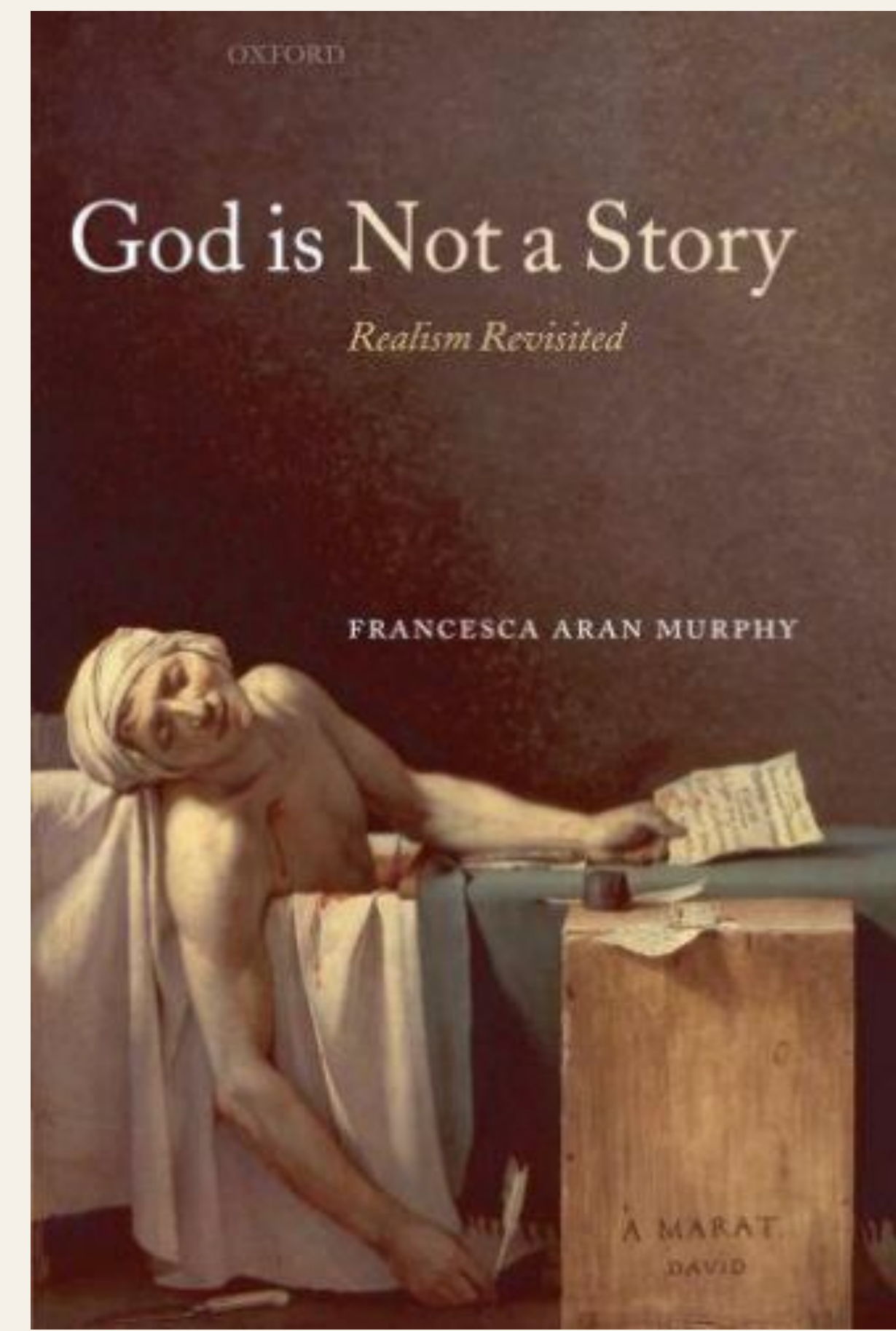


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The **concept God** may well be *sense dependent* on a whole lot of other human concepts.

It does not follow that **God** is *reference dependent* on anything at all.





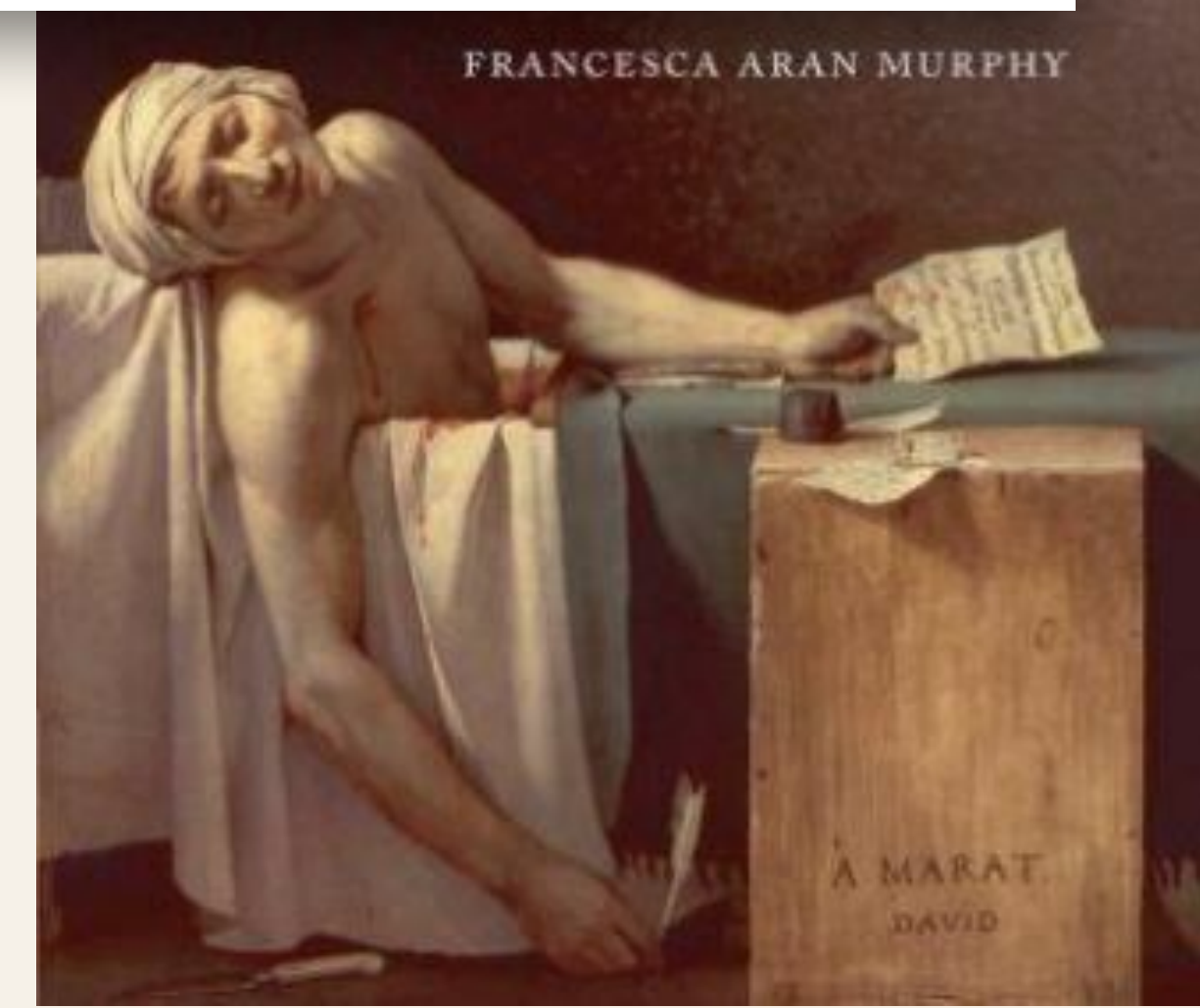
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It does not follow that **God** is *reference dependent* on anything at all.

These are two different issues, with different significance for the potential believer, and are decided in *different ways*.

The **concept God** may well be *sense dependent* on a whole lot of other human concepts.



God is not any kind of thing?

He is not a body with a shape, nor a measured or definite substance. Nothing looks like Him, either regarding measurability or regarding divisibility in parts. God is not a substance, nor can substances define Him; He is not an accident nor can accidents define Him. No existent being looks like Him and ***“nothing can be compared with Him.”*** God does not look like things. Quantity cannot limit Him; no region can enclose Him; no side can surround Him.



Al-Ghazali
(Iran, Iraq, Arabia)
c. 1056–1111

The Revival of the Religious Sciences,
Book 2, Section 1, Paragraph 1.

God is not one *thing*
among many.

God is not an instance
of some *kind* of being.



One Analogy, from Hewitt

Consider the *sand* and the *water*.

The water in the ocean and the sand on the beach is a kind of *stuff* rather than an individual *thing*.

(It makes no sense to count how many sands there are at the beach. You can count *grains* of sand, or *piles* of sand, not *the sand*. The sand is not an *individual*, a *one among many*.)



Bas van Fraassen

“‘World’ is not a Count Noun”

Noûs 29 (1995) 139-157.

Another Analogy

Let *the world* be *everything that is*, taken as a whole.

Used in this sense, “world” is not a *count noun*. There just *couldn't be* more than one world in this sense.

(Of course, there may be plenty of different *ways that this world could have been*, but none of these ways things could be *is everything that is*, taken as a whole.)



Bas van Fraassen

“‘World’ is not a Count Noun”

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Another Analogy

When Hewitt says God is not an instance of any **kind**, what work is that claim doing?

Is *God* unique in the same sort of way that *the world* is unique?



The Point

For the friend of *Divine Simplicity*,
God is neither like the *world* nor
like a particular kind of *stuff*.

These examples show that it is
coherent to talk of what exists
without everything existing
being an *individual* in a *kind*.

Lessons for thinking
about religious language,
and remaining questions

The point is *not* that Ultimate
Reality is like the world of numbers.

This is an *example* not an *analogy*.

An example of *what*?

Of a different *approach* to understanding the significance of a kind of talk that is alien to you, or that you find difficult to grasp.

An inferentialist account is a useful *lens* for analysing a practice, especially when the *metaphysics* of the vocabulary is unclear to you.

Second, it's important to keep the
sense-dependence / reference-
dependence distinction in mind.

Deciding *in advance* of the space of possible answers to *metaphysical* questions is to unwisely foreclose the space of options.

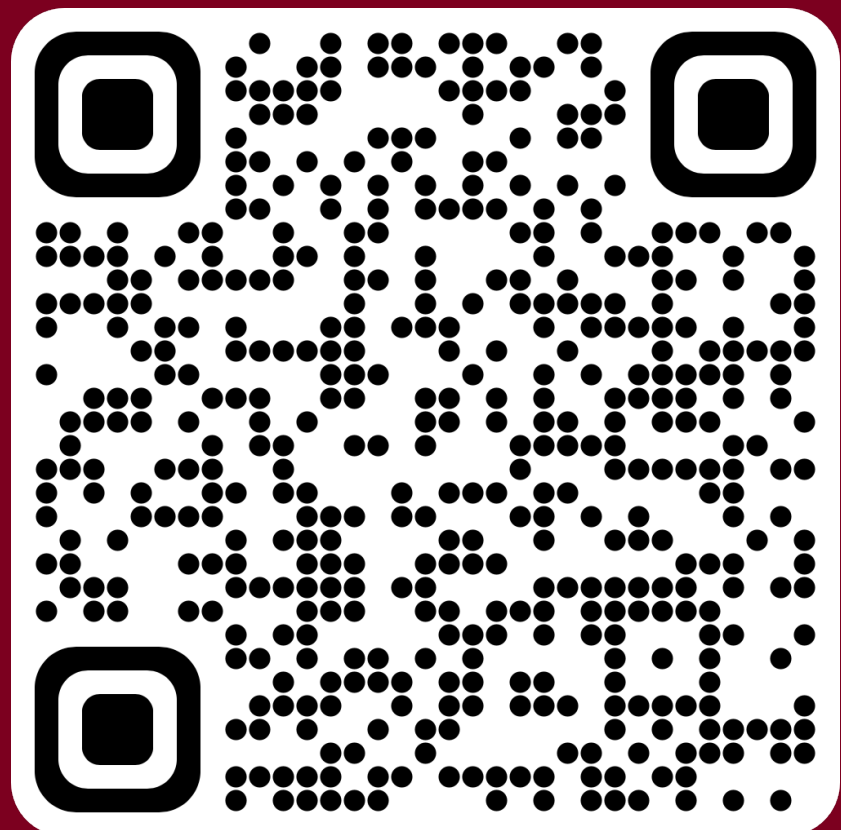
Deciding *in advance* of the space of possible answers to *metaphysical* questions is to unwisely foreclose the space of options.

If you pay attention to how concepts are *used* in a discourse, you'll have a better grasp of what is being *said*, and what that talk might *mean*.

What kind of commitments concerning **kinds** and **identity** are involved in the claim that God is genuinely unlike any other thing?

What *else* is distinctive about the God concept, that can help us understand the coherence (or otherwise) of talk and thought about God?

Thanks to Simon,
for such a rich &
provocative book!



Download these slides from <https://consequently.org/p/2023/nwg>