

Agora

by stephen hastings-king

When we gather, we encircle a white sphere, a globe without the maps that has been placed in the middle of a field of green velvet.

Once the circle is complete along with the others I close my eyes and focus on an imaginary complex of open spaces. This is where we deliberate. Each deliberation redefines us. I do not know how the passage works. I have never understood it. Sometimes I think our gathering is a ritual centered on collective visualization. Other times I feel like I have been physically transported. I am not sure there is a difference.

Our deliberations begin by establishing their own basis. We approve the day's axioms. We use them to define variables and rehearse basic operations. It is exhausting and time consuming but some among us think it important to array the whole of our machinery in the way one cleans a gun or disassembles and reassembles an engine. The idea was to provide formal criteria for evaluating arguments. The slogan that carried the day was: No Understanding without Rules for Truth Production. They said that the rules would provide structure and simplify our deliberations. They said: If your argument violates the rules, you must recuse yourself from that point forward, like a piece that is taken in a chess game.

Now, so long as the forms are adhered to, it doesn't matter what you say. But our procedures for establishing the basis of our deliberations do not allow for questions about that basis because each such question would require its own basis and early in our history we determined that we fear an infinite regress. But I think there is a problem. I can demonstrate it by advancing formally correct arguments about nothing. I practice at home by making little stories in which nothing happens except that letters are moved

around: A B C D E. I practice but when I am in the agora the esprit de corps prevents me from acting. People suspect me anyway. And when I say "I am a team player" something in my demeanor makes the claim implausible. Perhaps there is a penalty for thinking as I do, something that I wear but cannot see, some mark on my skin.

