

Objects in Thoughtspace Are Closer Than They Appear

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Saede Riordan

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Epistemic Status: A potentially useful fake framework. Trying to talk past the metaphor.

If you ask google what an egregore is, google will helpfully give you a list of several thousand articles talking about the occult and magical group mind generated thought entities. This somewhat clashes with the idea of egregores that rationalists and rationalist-adjacents just can't seem to stop referencing.

What's even worse, nobody actually bothers to define their terms when they use the word. They just point in "you know, like that occult thing" and link the Wikipedia article on egregores as if that somehow explains anything. Here's the introduction to the exploring egregore's essay series doing just that:

Sometimes people in the rationalist community write about egregores. Scott has written about Moloch. Sarah Constantin wrote a great one about Ra. That's more about the results of processes than something individuals would worship (like the Invisible Hand), but the *feeling* of them seemed very right. They were terrible and inhuman, a drive given form that we could never really comprehend.

And here's Sarah doing the same thing when talking about Ra:

The usual pitfall when using poetic language to define egregores is making them too broad. There is not *one* root of all evil that causes all the ills of the world.

Okay but it helps to define them *at all*. The most anyone ever seems to do is point to earlier works on the topic. As far as I can tell, Scott was the one who introduced the concept of egregores if not the name. Nick Land seems to have been the first person to refer to the ideas as egregores by name, but he doesn't define them at all. Sarah refers to Scott and to the Wikipedia article, the exploring egregores series refers to Sarah and Scott and the Wikipedia article, but nobody seems to be talking about quite the same sorts of things, which makes this all much more confusing and complicated.

So, let's start from square one and try and actually figure out what egregores are, and what all these essays about them are referring to.

Wikipedia describes the term egregore in the following way:

Egregore (also **egregor**) is an occult concept representing a "thoughtform" or "collective group mind", an autonomous psychic entity made up of, and influencing, the thoughts of a group of people. The symbiotic relationship between an egregore and its group has been compared to the more recent, non-occult concepts of the corporation (as a legal entity) and the meme.

So everyone's mental belief energy/氣 comes together to make a creature composed out of condensed belief in them. The prototypical modern variant of the egregore is slenderman, a monster those victims belief power it into becoming real enough to hurt them via a reinforcing feedback cycle.

This idea of "beings powered by belief" is then often extrapolated to other beings but as tvtropes properly points out, the concept itself is, in fact, older than feudalism. It's implicitly a part of the Greek and Roman pantheistic traditions, as well as Japanese Shinto.

That clearly is not quite what rationalists seem to be talking about though. Okay, so, what's the deal? What makes an egregore?

Let's start by looking at a list of the majority of the egregores, and see where we can't classify them based on their properties.

We'll start with possibly the most famous egregore of course. The original rationalist demon. Moloch, as described by Scott Alexander.

In some competition optimizing for X, the opportunity arises to throw some other value under the bus for improved X. Those who take it prosper. Those who don't take it die out. Eventually, everyone's relative status is about the same as before, but everyone's absolute status is worse than before. The process continues until all other values that can be traded off have been – in other words, until human ingenuity cannot possibly figure out a way to make things any worse.

So to generalize away from the specific example of Moloch towards the abstract phenomena, Moloch is a particular outcome of interacting systems. It's an ~ Emergent Property ~ of systems, it arises as a result of various forces competing with each other. In other words, you put all these people together and program them to interact in particular ways, and Moloch will emerge as a pseudo-actor despite no one, in particular, advocating for the strictly worse "Molochian" values. (Yes I know Nick Land is technically a real person).

Next let's take a look at Ra, as described by Sara Constantin

Ra is something more like a psychological mindset, that causes people to actually *seek* corruption and confusion, and to *prefer corruption for its own sake* — though, of course, it doesn't feel quite like that from the inside.

Ra is a specific kind of glitch in intuition, which can roughly be summarized as the drive to *idealize vagueness and despise clarity*.

This is slightly different. Whereas Moloch is a property of systems, Ra-like tendencies are instead a property of *individuals*. As Sarah defines it, an individual can be "Ra-worshipping" but an institution can also be "very Ra" as well.

I think it's important to distinguish these two types of phenomena, but let's keep looking through different egregores and see what else we find. Here's Azathoth

There are *some* truths you can rely on. Everything dies. The gulf between the stars is so empty and so vast that it's hopelessness can not even fit in your mind. Entropy will eventually disassemble the entire universe. And of course, if all promises are lies, then in the fullness of time all betrayal is inevitable. You can count on that. Absolute stillness and absolute chaos are both true, they're just not useful to anything.

Azathoth is the lord of truth. And to someone truly, unflinchingly open, then the only truth is death, entropy, and nihilism. Those are the things She and Her cultists love.

Azathoth is in a sense more like Ra than like Moloch.

So we have at least two types of phenomenon here being called an egregore, in addition to the classic "belief powered supernatural being" type egregore. So let's break the term apart and create a sort of taxonomy of egregores.

Alexandrian Egregores are what I'll be calling the first category of entity. Things like Moloch, or the Invisible Hand of the Market, or Evolution, or Elua. Abstract forces that exist as outcomes of how systems interact with each other. These entities are highly gearsy, they are functions of systems and the way they emerge from the systems can be studied and examined.

Contrasting this, we have **Constantinian Egregores**, like Ra, Cthugha, or Azathoth, which could be described as attractors in thoughtspace. There are certain places where minds tend to be drawn and cluster, certain ideas that attract certain types of minds. Abstract concepts that tend to warp memetic reality around themselves. Tribalism. Extremism. Nihilism.

Lastly, for completeness, we have **Roman Egregores** like Christ, the Hellenistic pantheon, and other thought entities whose properties are externally imposed and which is maintained by the power of the memeplex within the broader culture. Instead of being an unlabeled entity that exists at an attractor in thoughtspace, we have a structure in thoughtspace artificially imposed by the culture.

Do they overlap? You bet they do. For one, many of the Constantinian egregores produce second-order effects in the form of Alexandrian egregores which they currently share names with. Ra the mind glitch gives rise to Ra the property of institutions. Roman Egregores are often intentionally created in the depressions caused by Constantinian egregores, like Aries god of War.

Hopefully making these distinctions will enable the discussion around egregores and their usefulness as concepts to be a bit more coherent.