ANARCHY, STATUS UPDATES, AND UTOPIA

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What will it take to bring the rule of law to social software?
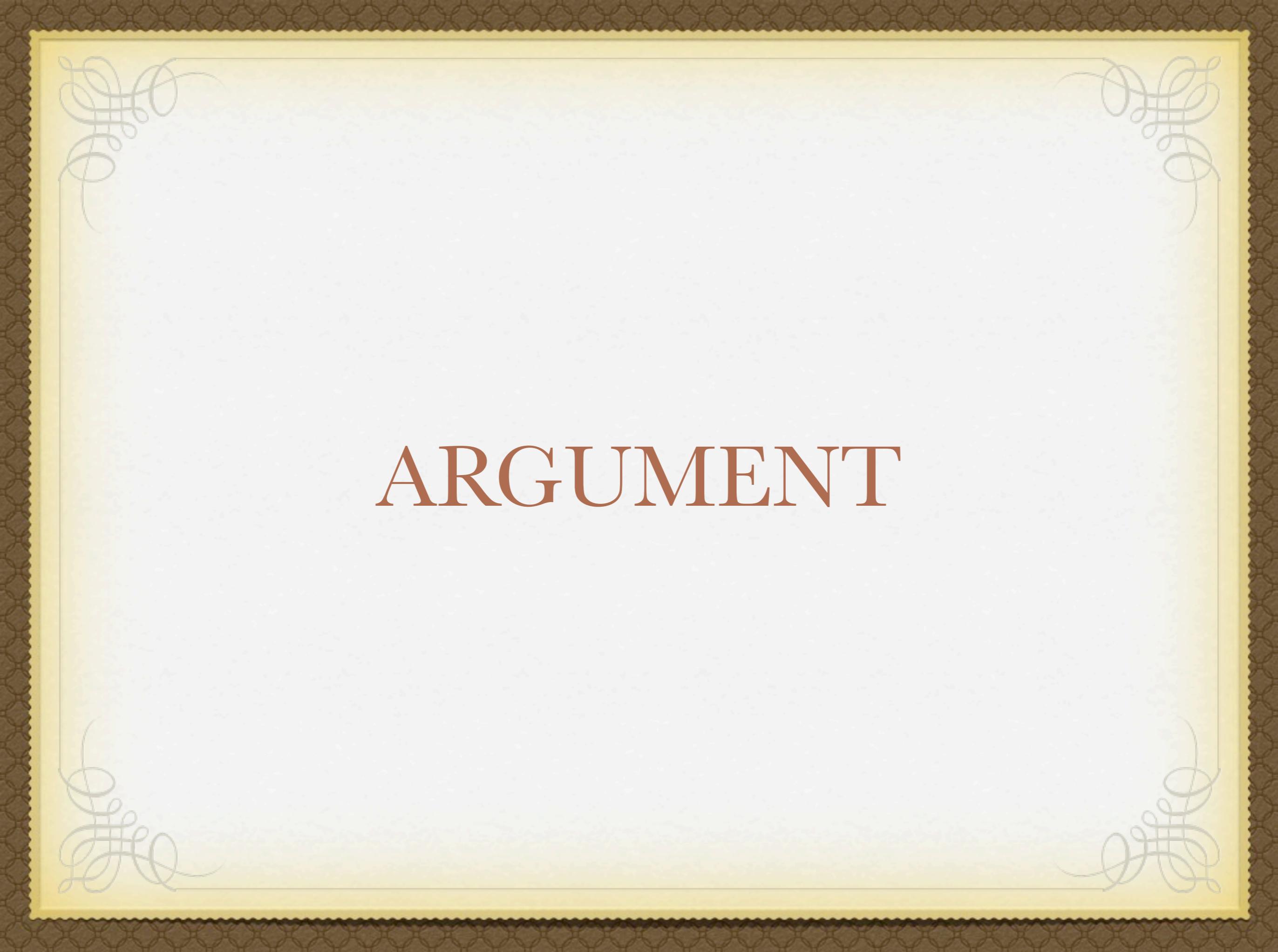
COUNTDOWN

THREE STORIES

❋ Privacy on Facebook

❋ Banishment from Google+

❋ Censorship in The Sims Online

TWO ANXIETIES

* The God problem: technical power

  * Code is law

  * And the platform owner controls the code

* The *Cheers* problem: social lock-in

  * Social software is social

  * No one wants to be the first to leave

ONE CLAIM

❋ These anxieties are closely linked

 ❋ Technical power is inescapable …

 ❋ … and inescapably social

ARGUMENT

THE MASTER SWITCH

✳ Protests against the "new Facebook" in 2011

  ✳ … and 2009 and 2008 and 2006

  ✳ Unceasing privacy-architecture churn

✳ Google suspends accounts, often without warning

✳ Censorship rumors outpace reality, but there is some

REACTION

❋ "Like the Internet itself, Diaspora isn't housed in any one place, and it's not controlled by any one entity (including us)."

❋ "Bitcoin uses peer-to-peer technology to operate with no central authority … ."

❋ "A central objective of Solipsis is to create a virtual world which is as independent as possible from the influence of private interests, such as server ownership."
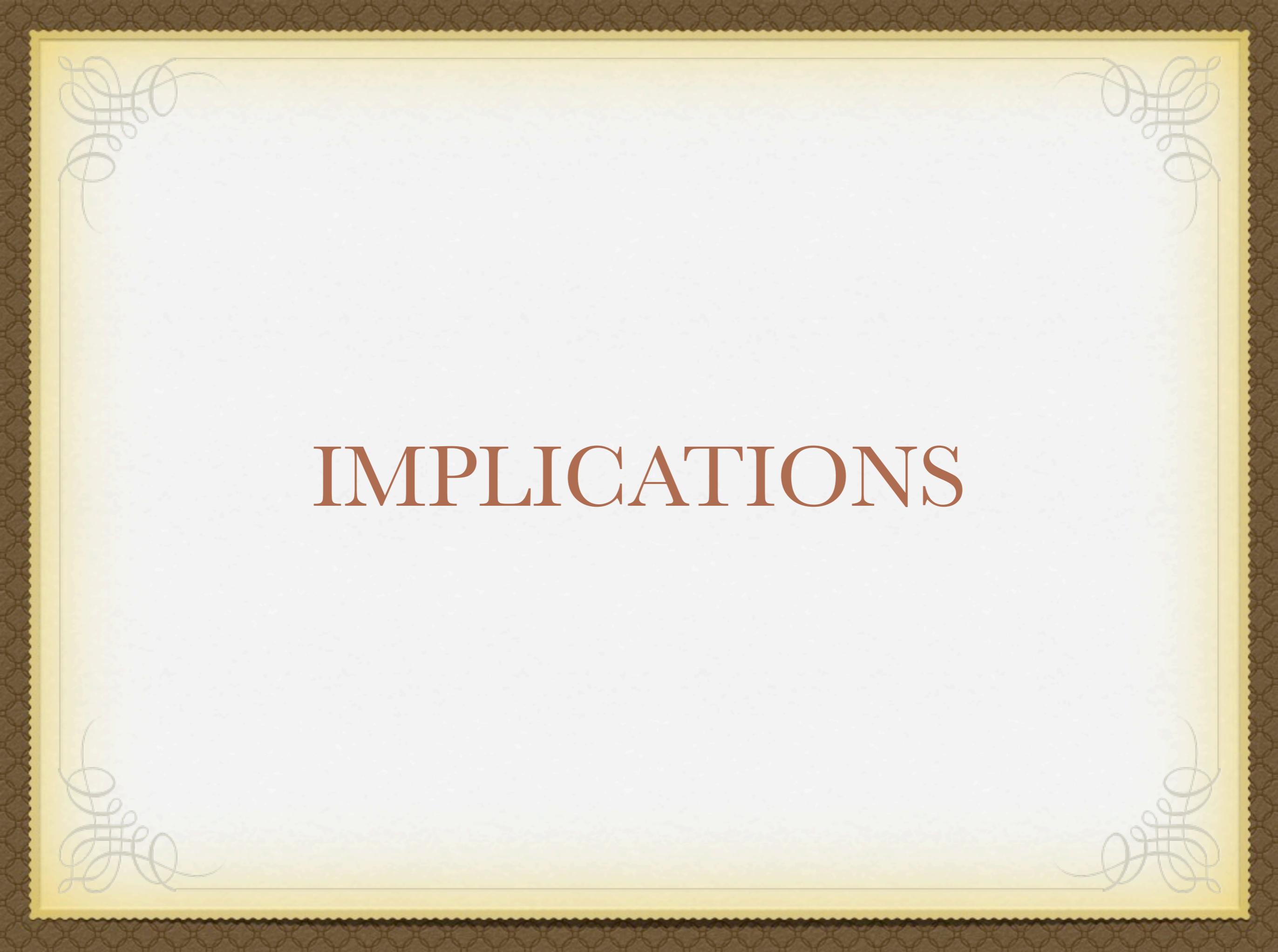
INEVITABILITY

✳ Code is ~~law~~

   ✳ Online social media can't not have software

✳ Freezing the code forever is not a realistic option

   ✳ Bugs are inevitable

   ✳ Unexpected use cases mean contested use cases

   ✳ So *someone* has to be able to make changes

SOCIAL SOFTWARE

* Social software enables social connections

   * But it also requires social agreement

* What makes Facebook Facebook? Facebook.

* What makes Diaspora Diaspora? Diaspora?

* What makes Bitcoin Bitcoin? User consensus.

* These issues *do not arise* with non-social software

SO?

❋ The God problem is more immediately dramatic

❋ But the *Cheers* problem has real bite in the long run

❋ God can't be nerfed; exit can never be made costless

❋ To join a platform is to commit to a community

❋ Technical change over time is inevitable

❋ And those technical choices are inherently political

IMPLICATIONS

ANARCHY

- ❋ Ex ante contracts can't possibly be complete enough

  - ❋ Even when embedded in software

  - ❋ Especially when embedded in software

- ❋ The choice among communities is "free and forced"

  - ❋ Don't just think of Facebook dictating terms

  - ❋ It's also Facebook's *other users* dictating them to you

STATE (ONLINE)

❋ Evil BigCo rhetoric is (mostly) overblown

   ❋ Zuckerberg doesn't set a daily oppression quota

   ❋ There are petty tyrants, too

   ❋ User drama is a customer support cost

❋ Platforms don't want to be in the adjudication business

   ❋ But social media, by their nature, create conflicts

STATE (OFFLINE)

❊ Governments stand for popular will and rule of law

    ❊ Except for jurisdictional mismatches

    ❊ Except when they don't understand the problem

    ❊ Except when they are the problem

❊ The mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away

UTOPIA

✳ Formal rule of law will be in platforms' own interest

   ✳ Even if they're not always good at recognizing it

✳ A rule-of-law culture must come from the users

   ✳ Governance = cart, polity = horse

   ✳ Broad debate and "civic" engagement are essential

✳ Restraints on the abuse of technical and social power will come from the community, not from the software

The rule of law will come when we, the users, build it.