

PHILOSOPHY OF INTIMACY AND THE THEORY OF JUSTICE

Studies in Generative Relational Being

VOLUME II

Generativity, Value, and Power

Wanhong Huang

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Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice
Studies in Generative Relational Being

Wanhong Huang

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FOREWORD

This book is written in gratitude to one I deeply love: the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves to travel, and loves the natural world, and above all the mountains and the forests, and who loves political economy and culture. We are natives of the same homeland, yet it was only in Japan that we met, as though by a miracle. She became the reason I wrote this series of papers and this book, and the moving force behind my building, and my living out, of its theory.

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CHAPTER 1

The Joint Attention of Value and the Creation of Language

This paper addresses the question prior to that of its predecessor. The prior paper examined whether a generative cycle is good and whether it is sustainable; the present paper examines the antecedent question of how relation and value are constituted at all, how a value not yet named comes to be, and how the language by which a bond subsists is made. The method proceeds in order of grounding. It begins in phenomenology, with the datum, prior to theory, in which two persons co-apprehend a value generated between them and not yet symbolised. From the description of that datum it derives an ontology (relation as the being of a generative system, grammar as the manifestation of the system's dynamics, value as its phenomenon) in which the phenomenon reflexively reconfigures the dynamics that produce it, and the subject is generated within the cycle it generates. The formal epistemologies are admitted only thereafter: a quantum-structural relational grammar, employed strictly as an epistemic model and not as a physical hypothesis, in which co-apprehension is a participatory measurement that generates rather than registers its value; and, symmetrically, the political-economic thesis that the circulation of value reconfigures the subject that creates it, alienation and self-realisation being the negative and positive phase of one reflexive cycle, distinguished by the sign of an independently definable reproduction surplus. These are distinct symmetry-broken phases of one abstract structure, which no framework possesses externally; their plurality is established as the method dialectical materialism requires of a totality not yet complete, rather than as eclecticism. The paper concludes in a practice and an ethics. The practice is not the construction of a grammar but the cultivation of a field within which a grammar admits of continual joint reconfiguration; and the ethics turns on the result that no finite subject can guarantee the goodness of its own practice, a subject that could having traversed the is-ought gap and become the infinite reason the series denies. It is the impossibility of that guarantee that constitutes the good as a matter of ethics rather than calculation, and as an unfinished process rather than a possessible state.

For her,

with whom the first name was made
that no one else could read,
*and in whose eyes I first saw
that I had been seen seeing.*

死生契阔，与子成说。

To the one I love most.

1.1. Introduction

This paper is the tenth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. The prior papers established a framework in which the goodness of a relation is read in the geometry of its cycles of value, the good cycle distinguished from the vicious by the sign of an accumulated phase, and they closed on a question they did not resolve: that the joint creation of value presupposes that two persons can jointly recognise what value is being created, and that the language by which a bond subsists intervenes in that recognition. The present paper addresses the question prior to the goodness of a cycle, namely how relation and value are constituted at all, and it does so by treating three matters together: the constitution of value, the mechanism by which two persons jointly apprehend it, and the role of symbolisation, of the making of language, in that apprehension.

The central thesis is stated here in advance of its development. Value is not a property antecedently resident in an object or a relation, and it is not the unsymbolisable remainder of the Real that any naming would falsify. Value is a phenomenon emergent on the coupled dynamics of the three Lacanian registers, the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, transversal across the three and localisable in none. Joint attention is the mechanism of its participatory generation: two persons do not detect an antecedent value but generate it in the manner of their attending. And symbolisation is internal to its sustenance rather than opposed to it: a symbolisation that sustains the coupling of the Symbolic with the Real, the poetic, regenerates the value, while a symbolisation that severs that coupling, the settling, extinguishes it. The making of language is, on this account, not the enemy of the nameless but the medium of the value's recurrent regeneration.

The method of the paper proceeds in order of grounding, and the order is substantive rather than expository. The paper begins by establishing the structure within which value is located, the three registers as coupled systems (§1.3); it describes, phenomenologically and without explanatory supplement, the datum of co-apprehension (§1.4, §1.5); it derives the ontology that the datum requires (§1.6); and only then does it admit the formal apparatus, the quantum-structural articulation of participatory measurement (§1.7). It next confronts the limit of formal modelling directly, in a dilemma that conditions the entire formal programme (§1.8); develops the political economy of the reflexively

reconfigured subject (§1.9); specifies the relation among the disciplinary frameworks as symmetry-broken phases of one structure (§1.10); and concludes in a practice (§1.11) and an ethics (§1.14), terminating in plural conclusions rather than a synthesis (§1.15). The motivation for admitting the formal apparatus last is that each formal system is a settled symbolic apparatus imported from a domain in which its results are already cashed; to introduce it before the phenomenon is described is to expend, in advance, a determination the description has not underwritten, which is the operation the series identifies as settling failure. The apparatus is to be earned from the phenomenon and not expended upon it.

The contribution of the paper is fourfold. First, it supplies an ontology of value as an emergent of coupled registers, which yields a dynamical account of why the settling of value into pure symbol extinguishes rather than merely impoverishes it. Second, it articulates the participatory generation of value in the formal structure of quantum measurement, employed strictly as an epistemic model. Third, it isolates and examines a dilemma in the formal modelling of value: that the subject who creates value is reconfigured within the cycle of value, so that the generating mechanism is rewritten by its own products, with the consequence that the standard formal tools, the grammars of the Chomsky hierarchy and the fixed-law dynamical systems, are inadequate in a manner that is structural rather than incidental. Fourth, it grounds an ethics of the unguaranteeable good in an argument from the is–ought gap. The next section situates these contributions with respect to the frameworks on which they draw and against which they are defined.

1.2. Background and Theoretical Frameworks

The paper draws on, and defines itself against, several established frameworks. This section surveys them and states the paper’s position with respect to each, in the order in which they enter the subsequent development. The survey is organised under six headings: joint attention, the grammatical modelling of interaction, the ontology of value, the quantum-structural modelling of cognition, relational and process ontology, and the method of cross-disciplinary unification.

1.2.1 Joint attention

The concept of joint attention originates in developmental psychology, where it designates the triadic structure in which two subjects orient together toward a shared object, each aware of the other's orientation (Tomasello 1999; Trevarthen 1979). In Tomasello's account the capacity for joint attention is foundational for the acquisition of language and culture, the shared orientation toward a third term being the condition under which symbols acquire their intersubjective stability (Tomasello 1999). The phenomenological tradition supplies a distinct but compatible account of intersubjectivity, in which the other is given not as an inferred subject behind a body but in a primordial attunement of embodied subjects: Husserl's analysis of intersubjective constitution (Husserl 1960), Merleau-Ponty's account of intercorporeality, in which two bodies are attuned prior to any concept (Merleau-Ponty 2012), and Zahavi's systematic development of the phenomenological position (Zahavi 1975).

The present paper retains the concept and the lineage but displaces the structure. The joint attention of the developmental account is triadic and objectual: its third term is an object antecedently present in the world. The co-apprehension of value treated here requires a joint attention whose third term is not an antecedent object but a value in the course of emergence, transversal across the registers and resident in none. This is joint attention at a limit the developmental account does not reach, more adequately described by the phenomenology of intercorporeality and by the psychoanalytic account of an attention organised around a void; the prior paper of this series established the corresponding mechanism at the constitution of the subject, and the present paper displaces it to the constitution of a value between subjects.

1.2.2 The grammatical modelling of interaction

The treatment of structured generativity by formal grammars descends from the Chomsky hierarchy, which classifies grammars and their languages by the form of their production rules, from the regular through the context-free and context-sensitive to the recursively enumerable (Chomsky 1965; Hopcroft et al. 2006). The hierarchy and its associated automata supply the standard formal vocabulary for generative structure, and the series has employed probabilistic context-free grammars in this vocabulary to model the recursion

of generative justice (Eglash 2016; Eglash 1999). The modelling of interaction specifically, as distinct from the generation of strings, has been pursued in game-theoretic and dialogical formalisms and in the various interaction grammars of computational linguistics, in which the units generated are not sentences but moves in a structured exchange.

The present paper employs the grammatical vocabulary, in the sense that it treats the dynamics of a relation as a generative grammar, the relational grammar of §1.6. But it argues, in §1.8, that the relation it treats exhibits a feature no grammar of the Chomsky hierarchy accommodates: the production rules are themselves rewritten, within the process of generation, by what the process generates. This feature is shown to be orthogonal to the hierarchy rather than a position within it, and the consequence for the formal programme is examined at length.

1.2.3 The ontology of value

The paper engages several traditions in the theory of value. In the Marxian tradition, value is not a natural property but a social form, generated in production and circulation, and capable, under the wage relation, of turning against and dominating its producer: the analysis of value, the commodity form, and alienated labour in the *Manuscripts* and in *Capital* (Marx 1959; Marx 1976; Marx 1973). In the psychoanalytic tradition, value is bound to the economy of desire and enjoyment, organised around the objet a and jouissance of the Lacanian registers (Lacan 1992; Lacan 1978; Lacan 1998; Fink 1995; Evans 1996). In the tradition of generative justice, value must be retained by and returned to those who create it, the criterion of justice lying in the circulation of value through the generative network rather than its extraction from it (Eglash 2016). And the phenomenological theory of value, in Scheler's non-formal ethics, treats values as given in feeling, in a stratified order, irreducible to the goods that bear them (Scheler 1973).

The present paper does not adopt a realism in which value is an antecedent property awaiting detection, nor a pure constructivism in which value is exhausted by its symbolic positing. It advances, in §1.3 and §1.6, an ontology of value as a phenomenon emergent on the coupled dynamics of the three registers, transversal across them and reducible to none, and it relocates the three registers of value the series has employed, the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, as aspects internal to this emergent. The Marxian account of

the reconfiguration of the producer by the product is taken up, in §1.9, as a realisation of the paper’s reflexive structure in the register of political economy.

1.2.4 The quantum-structural modelling of cognition and the social

The application of the formal structure of quantum theory to cognition and decision, independently of any claim concerning a physical quantum substrate, constitutes the field of quantum cognition. Its results model order effects, interference, and contextuality in judgement and decision by the formal apparatus of state superposition, non-commuting observables, and basis-dependent measurement (Busemeyer and Bruza 2012; Aerts 2009). The distinction on which the field rests, between the employment of quantum formalism as a mathematical structure and the assertion of a physical quantum substrate, is the distinction the present paper observes. Beyond cognition, the extension of quantum structure to social ontology has been proposed, most expansively by Wendt, who advances a literal quantum social science in which social phenomena are grounded in physical quantum processes (Wendt 2015); the present paper does not adopt this literal position and is to be distinguished from it explicitly. The geometric phase, which the series employs to characterise the good cycle, originates in this quantum context, in the phase a state accumulates around a loop in its space of rays (Berry 1984; Pancharatnam 1956; Aharonov and Anandan 1987).

The present paper employs quantum structure, in §1.7, strictly as an epistemic model of participatory generation, with the physical thesis explicitly declined. It diverges from quantum cognition in its object, treating the co-generation of relational value rather than individual judgement, and from literal quantum social science in declining the substrate claim. In §1.8 it considers, and examines the cost of, a more developed quantum-field-theoretic modelling of the dynamics, the assessment of which is one of the paper’s principal formal contributions.

1.2.5 Relational and process ontology

The ontology the paper derives is a process ontology and a relational one, and it stands in a lineage. In Whitehead’s process philosophy, the fundamental entities are not enduring substances but events or occasions of becoming, and what appears as a thing is an

abstraction from a process (Whitehead 1978). In Simondon’s philosophy of individuation, the individual is not given antecedently but is constituted in a process of individuation that does not exhaust the pre-individual field from which it arises, the individual and its associated milieu being generated together (Simondon 2020). In Deleuze, difference and repetition are prior to the identities they generate, and the new is produced rather than reproduced (Deleuze 1994). These positions share the priority of process over substance, of generation over the generated, and of relation over the related terms.

The present paper’s ontology, in §1.6, is continuous with this lineage and adds a determinate clause. Relation, grammar, and value are three aspects of one generative system, of which the subject is a product rather than an external premise; and the system’s dynamics is reconfigured by its own products, the reflexive clause that distinguishes the paper’s process ontology and that conditions the formal dilemma of §1.8.

1.2.6 The method of cross-disciplinary unification

The paper’s final methodological commitment concerns the relation among the disciplinary frameworks it employs. Rather than subordinating them to a single master framework, or treating them as an eclectic assembly, it specifies them as symmetry-broken phases of one abstract structure, related as the realisations of one structure under the conditions of distinct disciplines. The figure of symmetry-breaking is borrowed from physics; the methodological position it supports, that no single framework possesses the whole and that the unbroken structure is cognised only across the phases and not from above, is developed in §1.10 and is there argued to be a dialectical-materialist rather than a relativist commitment. The geometric invariant proposed as conserved across the phases, the holonomy on which the good cycle turns, is advanced as the paper’s most speculative conjecture and is left, as the argument requires, unsettled.

With the frameworks surveyed and the paper’s position with respect to each stated, the development proceeds, beginning with the three registers as coupled systems.

1.3. The Three Registers and the Emergence of Value

The phenomenological datum of the following section is the co-apprehension, by two persons, of a value generated between them. The adequate description of that datum requires a prior account of the structure within which value is located, and the present section supplies it. The account is Lacanian in its terms and dynamical in its construal: the three registers of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are introduced as three coupled systems, and value is specified as a phenomenon emergent on the dynamics of the coupled whole rather than as a state of any single register. This construal, developed below, determines the sense in which value is at once symbolisable and never exhausted by symbolisation, and thereby corrects a misconstrual to which the description is otherwise liable.

1.3.1 The three registers

Lacan distinguishes three registers, or orders, in which psychic and relational reality is structured (Evans 1996). The *Imaginary* is the register of the image, of identification and the specular relation, instituted in the mirror stage, in which the subject apprehends itself and the other under the aspect of a unified form and a captating likeness (Lacan 2006a). The *Symbolic* is the register of the signifier, of language, law, and the differential structure within which terms acquire determinacy through their relations to other terms; it is the order of speech and the social, and the order in which exchange, nomination, and the cashing of a term against others are possible (Lacan 2006a). The *Real* is the register of what resists symbolisation absolutely, what falls outside the signifier and returns always to the same place; it is approached through the concepts of *das Ding* and *objet a*, and is bound to *jouissance*, the enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle.

Two concepts of the Real require distinction, since the analysis of the following sections turns on it. *Das Ding*, the Thing, is the term of the early account in the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: the absolute Other of the subject, an originary void at the centre of the Real around which the subject's economy is organised and which no representation reaches (Lacan 1992). *Objet a*, the object-cause of desire, is the term of the later account: not the object at which desire aims but the object that causes it, a remainder that falls from the field of the Other and functions as the cause of desire rather than its goal

(Lacan 1978; Fink 1995). The relation between the two is one of development rather than opposition: *objet a* may be construed as the objectalisation, within the economy of desire, of the void that *das Ding* names in the Real. *Jouissance* is the enjoyment associated with this register, transgressive of the pleasure principle, at once sought and unbearable, and it is the quantity that the later argument identifies as the carrier of the relational phase (Lacan 1998; Fink 1995).

1.3.2 The registers as coupled systems

In its late development Lacan presents the three registers as knotted, in the figure of the Borromean knot: three rings so linked that the severing of any one releases the other two (Lacan 1998; Evans 1996). The present paper retains the interdependence the knot expresses but reconstrues it dynamically. The static topology of the knot is replaced by a dynamics of coupling: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are treated as three coupled systems, each with its own internal dynamics and its own state, interacting through coupling terms by which the state of each conditions the evolution of the others.

The registers as coupled dynamical systems. The three registers are construed as three coupled dynamical systems. Each register possesses an internal dynamics and a state; the registers interact through coupling terms, such that the state of each conditions the evolution of the others. The interdependence Lacan expresses in the static figure of the Borromean knot, that the severing of any one ring releases the others, is reconstrued as the dynamical condition that the suppression of any one coupling alters the dynamics of the coupled whole. The construal is dynamical rather than topological: the registers are not three rings in a fixed linkage but three systems in continuous mutual conditioning.

1.3.3 Value as an emergent of the coupled dynamics

Value is specified, on this construal, as a phenomenon emergent on the dynamics of the coupled whole. It is not a state of the Imaginary alone, not a state of the Symbolic alone,

and not a state of the Real alone; it is a collective mode of the three coupled systems, arising on their interaction and not localisable in any one of them.

Value as an emergent collective mode of the coupled registers. Value is not a state of any single register but a phenomenon emergent on the dynamics of the three coupled registers. Formally, where each register is a dynamical system and the registers are coupled, value corresponds to a collective observable of the coupled system, an order parameter that is non-zero only under non-vanishing coupling among the registers and that vanishes when any one coupling is suppressed. Value has accordingly an imaginary aspect (the idealised image, the captating form, the value invested in the likeness), a symbolic aspect (the nameable, exchangeable, cashable value), and a real aspect (the value organised around the void, bound to jouissance, irreducible to the signifier); but value is identical to none of these aspects and is exhausted by none. It is the collective mode in which the three are coupled.

The consequence that governs the subsequent analysis is the following. Since value is an emergent of the coupled dynamics, its reduction to any single register, the suppression of a coupling, extinguishes it. The reduction of value to the Imaginary is its collapse into idealisation, the vertiginous investment in a form that exhausts itself; the reduction to the Symbolic is its collapse into pure exchange, the cashing of the value as a settled token severed from the Real; the reduction to the Real is its collapse into an unsymbolisable remainder that cannot be held or shared. Each reduction suppresses a coupling and extinguishes the emergent. This supplies a dynamical account of a thesis the prior papers asserted: the settling of value into pure symbol, its severance from the Real, does not merely impoverish the value but extinguishes it, value being an emergent that the severance destroys.

This construal corrects a misconstrual to which the phenomenological description is otherwise liable, and which is addressed at §1.4.3. Value is not the unsymbolisable Real, the term that naming would kill; value is the emergent of the coupling of the Real with the

Symbolic and the Imaginary, and is therefore both symbolisable and inexhaustible by symbolisation. Two persons do symbolise value: they name it, they make private signs for it, they bring it into the Symbolic. The question is not whether value is symbolised but how. A symbolisation that sustains the coupling of the Symbolic with the Real, the poetic symbolisation of the later analysis, sustains the emergent; a symbolisation that severs the Symbolic from the Real, the settling symbolisation, suppresses the coupling and extinguishes it. The transversality of value across the three registers, its being an emergent of their coupled dynamics rather than a resident of any one, is the structure the following section's datum exhibits, and the structure to which the account of language in this series is addressed.

1.4. The Phenomenology of Nameless Co-Generation

This paper takes as its primitive datum a structure of experience that precedes every theoretical apparatus and to which every such apparatus must answer: the joint apprehension, by two persons, of a value that is being generated between them and that is not yet exhausted by symbolisation. The value is, in the terms of §1.3, an emergent of the coupled dynamics of the three registers, and the datum is its co-generation: a value with imaginary, symbolic, and real aspects, transversal across the three and resident in none. The structure is to be distinguished from three phenomena with which it is readily conflated, the agreement of two parties on a sign, the convergence of two gazes upon a shared object, and the exchange of a token whose content each party antecedently possesses. It is none of these, and the ground of the distinction is given in §1.3: each of the three is the reduction of value to a single register, the suppression of a coupling, which extinguishes the emergent. What is apprehended is in the process of generation; it is not yet, and will never be, exhausted by its symbolisation; and it is apprehended by each party under the aspect of being co-apprehended, the reciprocal awareness entering constitutively into what is generated. The methodological order of the paper follows the order of grounding. The phenomenological description is given first and without explanatory supplement (§1.4, §1.5); the ontology is then derived as the set of conditions under which the described structure is possible (§1.6); and the formal epistemologies (quantum-structural and political-economic) are introduced last, as the formal articulation of what

the ontology establishes rather than as independent posits laid over the description (§1.7, §1.9). The motivation for this order is substantive rather than expository. Each formal apparatus is a settled symbolic system imported from a domain in which its results are already cashed; to introduce such an apparatus prior to the description is to expend, in advance, a determination the description has not yet underwritten, which is the structural form of what the prior paper of this series termed settling failure. The apparatus is accordingly earned from the phenomenon and not expended upon it.

1.4.1 The datum described

The following case fixes the datum in its minimal form. It is offered as a description of a recurrent structure of experience, not as an anecdote.

An illustrative case — the unnamed value. Two persons are engaged in unremarkable conversation, the arrangement of a shared meal, the route of an afternoon walk. At a determinate moment the register of the exchange alters without announcement. A silence supervenes which is not the cessation of speech but a positive datum: a salience in the interval between them, apprehended by each as not deposited there by either. One party may, at a later time, attempt a name for it, *the beginning; the point at which I knew*, but the name is supplied retrospectively, is acknowledged by both as inadequate, and is treated by both as a record of the event rather than the event. What is given in the moment itself is not the content of what has arrived but the fact of its arrival; that the arrival is simultaneous for both; and that each apprehends in the other's expression the same arrival, such that the co-apprehension is internal to what is apprehended.

Reduced to its structure, the datum exhibits three features that the standard models of attention do not accommodate. The *first* is that the term apprehended is not an object antecedently present. In the developmental account of joint attention, the infant and caregiver orienting jointly toward a ball or an indicated bird (Trevvarthen 1979; Zahavi 1975), there is a determinate third term, an object antecedently present in the world, upon which two lines of regard converge. The present structure has no such antecedent term. What is jointly apprehended is a value in the course of emergence on the coupled dynamics of the registers (§1.3): a generation in progress, transversal across the imaginary, symbolic, and real, and localisable in none. It is not that the term cannot

be symbolised, but that its symbolisation, where it occurs, does not exhaust it, the real aspect of the emergent exceeding any signifier that names it. The *second* feature is that the apprehension is not a registration. Neither party detects a value antecedently present and awaiting detection; the value is not prior to the apprehension. The *third* feature is that the reciprocity of awareness is constitutive rather than cumulative. The structure is not the conjunction of two registrations (one party's apprehension of the term and, separately, that party's apprehension that the other apprehends it). The reciprocal awareness is itself a component of what is generated and a condition of its generation.

1.4.2 Joint attention at its limit, and the insufficiency of the cognitive-scientific model

The term *joint attention* is retained, on two grounds. The lineage is pertinent: the prior treatment in this series established joint attention as the mechanism through which two consciousnesses are mutually constituted and the subject is first formed (Paper V). And the structure at issue is continuous with that mechanism, displaced to a new term. The displacement is nonetheless decisive. The joint attention of developmental psychology is triadic and objectual: two subjects, one shared object, the geometry of two regards meeting at a thing. The co-apprehension of value requires a joint attention whose vertex is not an object but an opening, a convergence not upon a thing but upon a site at which something is not yet determinate. The structure is therefore not that of developmental joint attention but is more adequately described by a phenomenology of intercorporeality, in which two embodied subjects are attuned prior to the availability of a concept (Merleau-Ponty 2012), and by the psychoanalytic account of an attention organised around a void rather than directed upon a thing.

The distinction is consequential and not terminological. The persistent error is the assimilation of the limit-structure to the standard case, the construal of the co-apprehension of value as the attainment, by two parties, of agreement upon a shared sign whose content is thereby settled. The error is not that the two parties symbolise the value; they do, and the making of a shared sign for it is, as §1.3 establishes and the account of language in this series develops, internal to the value's sustenance. The error is the construal of that symbolisation as a *settling*: as the severance of the symbol from the Real, the cashing of the value as a determinate token whose content is exhausted in the signifier. Symbolisa-

tion of this kind suppresses the coupling of the Symbolic with the Real and extinguishes the emergent (§1.3.3); it is the operation the series identifies as settling failure. The contrary symbolisation, which sustains the coupling of the Symbolic with the Real, the poetic symbolisation of the later analysis (§1.11.3), does not extinguish the value but is the mode in which it is jointly held and recurrently regenerated. The structure to be described is therefore not the absence of a sign but a symbolisation that sustains rather than severs the coupling to the Real, a shared sign whose content is not exhausted in its being named.

1.4.3 The sense in which the value is nameless

The locution that the value is nameless, employed throughout the description, is to be understood in the determinate sense the preceding establishes, and not in the sense its surface suggests. The value is not nameless in the sense of being unsymbolisable, an unspeakable remainder of the Real that any name would falsify; that construal reduces value to a single register and is excluded by §1.3.3. The value is nameless in the sense that its symbolisation, which is possible and is undertaken, does not exhaust it: the value being an emergent transversal across the three registers, its real aspect exceeds any signifier that names it, such that the name is at once adequate as a sign held jointly and inadequate as an exhaustive determination. To say that the value is nameless is to say that no name closes it, not that no name reaches it. The two persons name the value, make a sign for it, bring it into the Symbolic; and the value, named, remains in generation, because the naming that sustains the coupling to the Real does not terminate the emergent but is one of the operations by which it is sustained. The description that follows is to be read under this correction throughout.

1.4.4 The constitutive identity of apprehension and generation

The three features converge on a single structural result, which is to be stated as the result it is rather than dissolved. In the standard case of perception, apprehension and generation are distinct: the object is present independently of its being perceived, and the perceiving contributes nothing to the object. In the described structure they are not distinct. The co-apprehension of the value, in the sense of §1.4.3, is identically its generation. The two parties do not detect a value and subsequently attend to it; in the

joint sustaining of an attention whose term is not exhausted by its symbolisation, the value is generated. Apprehension and generation are one act.

This result determines the conditions to be discharged by the ontology. A value generated in the act of being co-apprehended cannot be an entity antecedent to its apprehension; its mode of being is not that of an object. An apprehension that generates its own term cannot be a registration of antecedent states; its mode of cognition is not representational. The phenomenological description thus constrains both the ontology of value (value is non-antecedent) and the epistemology of its apprehension (cognition is non-representational), and it imposes these constraints prior to the introduction of any formal apparatus. The apparatus introduced in §1.7 is accordingly the formal articulation of a structure the description has already established, and not an external warrant. The remainder of the paper is constrained by the datum fixed here: each subsequent construction is to be assessed by its adequacy to the co-apprehension of a value transversal across the registers, generated in the act of its joint recognition and not exhausted by its symbolisation, and to nothing of larger scope.

1.5. The Formal Structure of the Datum

The description of §1.4 is now analysed for its structure, within the descriptive attitude and without explanatory supplement. The objective is to exhibit the form already present in the datum, so that the ontology of §1.6 is constrained by a determinate structure rather than by an impression. The three features identified above compose a single structure, the components of which are mutually dependent in the manner set out below.

1.5.1 Simultaneity as constitutive medium

The togetherness of the co-apprehension is not the synchrony of two independently occurring events. On the construal as synchrony, each party would possess a distinct apprehension, the two apprehensions coinciding in time by attunement or chance. That construal is inadequate to the datum. In the structure as described, there are not two apprehensions that coincide but one apprehension that is irreducibly of two parties. The togetherness is not a relation obtaining between two antecedent awarenesses; it is the medium within which each awareness is first constituted. The apprehension of one party

is internally determined by that party's apprehension of the other's apprehension, and conversely, such that neither awareness is well-defined independently of the other. This is the structure the prior treatment located at the constitution of the subject, where the first and second persons are mutually constituted rather than antecedently given and subsequently joined (Buber 1970); here the same structure obtains at the constitution of a value between two parties. The structure recurs at a higher level: in Paper V joint attention constitutes the persons, and here it constitutes the value the constituted persons sustain between them. The recurrence of the founding structure at successive levels is the first instance of a pattern the paper thematises in §1.10.

1.5.2 Mutual witness as reflexive and constitutive

The reciprocal awareness is reflexive: what each party apprehends includes the other's apprehension, and what is apprehended includes that reciprocal inclusion. The resulting regress, each party apprehends the term, apprehends the other apprehending it, apprehends the other apprehending its own apprehension, is not to be truncated but is the structural form of the density the description recorded. The reflexive witnessing is not a spectatorial relation to a completed fact; it is a component of the term's generation. Its function is constitutive: were the witnessing withdrawn, were one party to simulate apprehension while in fact absent, the term would not be generated, however exact the simulation. The structure is therefore not counterfeitable from a single side. This yields, at the level of description, the condition the ethics of §1.14 discharges: the value subsists only in a witnessing that is genuinely reciprocal, and is extinguished when one party becomes a spectator of, or an extractor from, the other's investment.

1.5.3 Directedness upon an opening

The co-apprehension is directed, it has the intentional form of a directedness-upon, but its term is an opening, a site at which something is not yet determinate, rather than an object. The psychoanalytic tradition supplies an account of an attention organised around a void without filling it; the contemplative traditions supply several. The prior paper established the corresponding thesis in its own terms: real value, the value capable of endogenously bearing the positive phase of a good cycle, is the value organised around an absence and resistant to symbolisation. The present analysis adds that this organisation is, at its

origin, joint: the void is co-encircled, attended by two parties conjointly. The nameless term is therefore not an object the parties have not yet named but an opening the parties jointly sustain. A consequence follows directly. To name the term, to fill the opening with a settled sign, terminates the generation; this is the pathology the prior paper identified as settling failure. The subsistence of the structure consists in the non-termination of the term, the sustaining of the opening, which is the condition the practice of §1.11 undertakes to tend.

1.5.4 The constitutive identity of apprehension and generation

The three features converge on the structural result that organises the paper. The co-apprehension of the nameless value is identically its generation; the epistemic operation and the ontological event are one. Conjoined with the third feature, this yields a structure of consequence. Because the directedness is upon an opening rather than an object, there is no antecedent value for the apprehension to copy; and because apprehension is generation, the value generated is conditioned by the manner of the apprehending. The manner of attending, the void around which, the register within which, the quality with which the opening is sustained, determines the value generated. There is no fact, antecedent to and independent of the joint apprehending, as to what the value is; the apprehending is not the measurement of an antecedent quantity but a participation that brings the quantity to determinacy. This is the structural antecedent of the formal model of §1.7, where it receives the articulation of a participatory measurement whose basis is selected in the manner of attending.

1.5.5 The structure stated

The structure is stated as a single result, to be discharged by the ontology of the following section.

The structure of co-apprehended value. In the founding datum, value is co-generated in co-apprehension, with four components: (i) the apprehension is irreducibly of two parties, the togetherness constituting the medium within which each awareness arises rather

than a relation between antecedent awarenesses; (ii) the reciprocal witnessing is reflexive and constitutive, a component of the term's generation rather than a report upon a completed fact; (iii) the joint attention is directed upon a sustained opening rather than upon an object, such that settling it with a sign terminates it; and (iv) apprehension and generation are one operation, whence the manner of the joint apprehending conditions the value generated. It follows that value, so structured, is not an entity antecedent to its co-apprehension, and that co-apprehension is not a representation of antecedent states: the datum determines a non-objectual ontology of value and a participatory epistemology of its apprehension, antecedently to the introduction of any formal apparatus.

This result is the constraint on what follows. The phenomenological analysis determines both the being of value and the mode of its cognition, in a determinate direction: away from the object and from representation, toward generation and participation. The following section discharges the first constraint, the ontological, by establishing what relation, grammar, and value must be in order that the datum of §1.4 be possible. The formal epistemologies are admitted only after that determination is made.

1.6. The Ontology of the Generative System

The phenomenology determines the task of the ontology. The task is not the general specification of what value or relation is, but the specification of what they must be in order that the datum of §1.4 be possible, a datum in which a nameless value is co-generated in co-apprehension, conditioned by the manner of a joint attending directed upon an opening. The ontology's theses are warranted as the conditions of that datum, and are not advanced beyond it. The section establishes three theses concerning the being of the generative system, each as a condition of the founding datum rather than as an independent posit, and concludes with the single structural feature, reflexivity, of which the two following sections supply distinct disciplinary realisations.

1.6.1 Relation, grammar, and value as aspects of one system

The construal of relation, grammar, and value as three entities standing in relations of causal or constitutive dependence, with a consequent question as to which is fundamental, is to be declined. That construal imports the externality the datum excludes: it posits an order of grounding among three separate items and thereby requires a standpoint external to all three from which their order is surveyed. The phenomenology affords no such standpoint. It affords a single event under three aspects, and the ontology specifies the aspects without dividing the event.

Relation, grammar, and value as three aspects of one generative system. Relation, grammar, and value are not three entities in relations of mutual foundation but three ontological aspects of a single generative system. Relation is the being of the system: the relational substance, that which is, not a phenomenon of a deeper term and not a representation. Grammar is the manifestation of the system's dynamics: not a description applied externally to the system in order to cognise it, but the form in which the system's dynamics manifests itself, the morphology of its movement. Value is the phenomenon of the system: the aspect of the generative system that emerges and admits of being witnessed. As aspects of one event rather than items in a sequence, the three are co-temporal of necessity; there is no moment at which the relation obtains while the grammar and value do not, since they are one being under three regards.

This dissolves the circularity that would otherwise obtain. The objection that relation, value, and grammar each presuppose the others, so that none can be initiated, assumes them to be distinct items requiring sequence. They are not distinct items. They are the being (relation), the manifest dynamics (grammar), and the appearance (value) of one generative system, and one entity under three regards requires no sequence, as a body's being, its motion, and its visible aspect are not three items awaiting one another but one entity regarded in three ways. The three registers of value established in the prior paper, the imaginary, the symbolic, the real, are accordingly relocated as distinctions

internal to the third aspect, articulations within the aspect termed phenomenon, and not as competitors to relation or grammar.

1.6.2 The ontological status of grammar

A consequence is to be drawn, as it governs the subsequent development. Grammar, in this ontology, is an ontological category and not an epistemic one. It is not the formal apparatus constructed by an observer in order to describe or predict the relation; that apparatus, the externalist's grammar, is a settling, a fixing of the dynamics into a surveyable rule-set, the operation §1.7 identifies as a form of possession. The grammar at issue is the self-manifestation of the dynamics: the form the generative movement assumes in moving, antecedent to and independent of any observer's attempt to fix it. The characteristic rhythm of two parties' being-together, the moves that are available to them and those that are not, the developing repertoire of private signs, is not an observer's description of their relation but the self-manifestation of the relation's dynamics. The grammar is in the movement, not in the notation.

This distinction supports a subsequent result. It permits the consistent assertion both that the relational grammar is real, being the system's own manifest dynamics, and that no notated grammar captures it, every notated grammar being an external settling that, in fixing the dynamics, falsifies the feature, open and continuing generation, constitutive of it. The grammar is, ontologically; it is non-possessible, epistemically; and §1.7 establishes that this non-possessibility is not a limitation of instruments but the formal signature of the relation's non-possessibility.

1.6.3 The reflexive structure

The structural feature that organises the paper, located phenomenologically in §1.5.4 and realised in distinct forms in the two following sections, is now stated ontologically. In a standard dynamical system the law of evolution is fixed: the state evolves, while the rule governing its evolution does not change in consequence of the evolution. The datum of §1.4 departs from this. There, apprehension was generation: the coming-to-be of the value was not the output of a fixed dynamics but an event whose manner conditioned what could subsequently obtain. Stated ontologically:

The reflexive reconfiguration of the dynamics by the phenomenon. The value, which is the phenomenon, does not merely issue from the grammar, which is the manifest dynamics; it reconfigures it. Each crystallisation of a nameless value into the relation alters the system's dynamics, modifying which moves are subsequently available, opening regions of the relational space that did not antecedently exist and foreclosing others. The generative system is one whose dynamics is reconfigured by its own products: the appearance reacts upon and reconfigures the movement that bore it. The system is therefore not one with a fixed law and a varying state, but one in which the law is itself transformed by what it produces, a self-modifying generativity.

Three consequences follow, each of which is discharged in the subsequent development.

The *first* is that the subject is generated within the cycle and is not antecedent to it. If the dynamics is reconfigured by its products, and if the parties to the relation are among the system's products, constituted, as the prior treatment held, in and through the relation rather than entering it complete, then the subject is not an external term standing outside the generative cycle and operating it. The subject is a product of the cycle it contributes to generating: a fixed point of the reflexive structure, not its external premise. There is no antecedently complete self that enters the relation in order to generate value; the self is, in part, what the relation's value-cycle generates. This is the antecedent that §1.9 develops into a political economy, the thesis that the circulation of value reconfigures the subject who creates it being Marx's, transposed here from the social to the ontological register.

The *second* is that the dynamics admits no external pre-enumeration. A system whose law is reconfigured by its products has no fixed law that an external observer could specify in advance of the system's operation, the subsequent law being generated within the operation, in the joint act, and not antecedently available. This is the ontological antecedent of the non-enumerability that §1.7 formalises: not the thesis that a super-physical process operates, but the thesis that any external fixing of the grammar fails because the

grammar fixed is in the course of being generated, internally, by the generation the fixing would be required to anticipate.

The *third* is that the manner conditions the product without remainder. Since apprehension is generation and the dynamics is reconfigured by what it generates, the manner of the system's operation, the void around which, the register within which, the quality with which the opening is sustained, is not incidental to the product. There is no separation of a neutral content of value from the manner of its co-generation; the manner is constitutive. This is the antecedent of the result that the ethics of §1.14 is not an ethics of externally assessed outcomes, and that the practice of §1.11 is the tending of the manner, of the field and its curvature, rather than the manufacture of the product.

1.6.4 The commitments and exclusions of the ontology

The character of the ontology is to be stated, together with its exclusions. It is a process ontology, and a dialectical one: there is no value antecedent to the relation's movement, and no movement antecedent to the relation; there is one generative system, manifest as relation, grammar, and value, whose dynamics is transformed by its own appearing. It is continuous in this respect with the relational ontology of the mother paper, being is relational, the terms are constituted in the relating, and adds the reflexive clause, that the relating is reconfigured by what it generates.

The ontology excludes three theses, and the exclusions are of equal standing with the commitments. It excludes substance: there is no value-substance, no relational substrate, subsisting beneath the system and persisting unchanged through its transformations; the three aspects are aspects of a movement, not properties of a thing. It excludes the external standpoint: there is no position external to the generative system from which its three aspects are surveyed and their order legislated, which is the ontological form of the absence of a metalanguage that the prior paper established, and which §1.10 discharges in addressing the cognition of the unbroken structure. And it excludes completion: the system is not a totality that is, but a totality in generation, its law in the course of being written; to treat it as complete, to notate its grammar and declare it captured, is the ontological form of settling, and, as §1.14 establishes, of alienation. These exclusions are not concessions. They are the conditions of the founding datum: a value antecedent as

substance could not be co-generated; a system surveyable externally would not require the joint internal witnessing of which the datum consists; and a completed totality could generate nothing, least of all a value not yet named.

The ontology possesses a single structural signature, reflexivity: the reconfiguration of the dynamics by the phenomenon, of the producer by the product. The signature is, to this point, abstract, stated in the general terms of relation, grammar, and value. The two following sections supply two disciplinary realisations of this structure, the abstract structure being realised, under the conditions of distinct disciplines, in distinct and mutually irreducible forms. Under the conditions of formal epistemology it is realised as a participatory, quantum-structural grammar (§1.7); under the conditions of political economy it is realised as the circulation of value that reconfigures its subject (§1.9). Neither realisation is the truth of the other, and neither is the unbroken structure; they are two symmetry-broken phases of it, and the cognition of the unbroken structure they share, in the absence of the external standpoint the ontology excludes, is the matter of §1.10.

1.7. The Quantum-Structural Articulation of the Relational Grammar

The ontology of §1.6 establishes four conditions: value is not antecedent to its co-apprehension; apprehension is identically generation; the manner of apprehension conditions its term; and the dynamics is rewritten by the term it generates. A cognition satisfying these conditions cannot be representational, since representation presupposes an antecedent term; it is participatory, in the sense that the cognition is a component of the generation of what is cognised. The present section establishes that the formal structure of quantum measurement supplies a precise articulation of participatory cognition, and writes the relational grammar in that structure. The articulation is structural and epistemic, and its scope is delimited at the outset.

1.7.1 Delimitation of the claim

The structure of quantum theory is employed here as a formal model of participatory generation. No claim is advanced that intimate relation, joint attention, or the neural

substrate is a quantum-physical system; no hypothesis is made concerning quantum coherence, entanglement, or physical collapse in any relational or cognitive substrate. The positions that do advance such claims, orchestrated objective reduction, and the literalist interpretation of quantum cognition, are not at issue, and the present argument is independent of their physical adjudication. The procedure is continuous with the series' prior use of probabilistic context-free grammars to model the recursion of generative justice (Eglash 2016; Eglash 1999): the assertion that a regenerative structure has the form of a branching process is an assertion about form and not about physical constitution, and the assertion that the co-apprehension of value has the form of a quantum measurement is of the same kind.

The quantum structure as epistemic model. Quantum structure is employed to articulate, in formal terms, the participatory character of co-generation established phenomenologically in §1.5 and required ontologically in §1.6. The relation asserted is a structural isomorphism at the level of epistemology and not a thesis concerning physical substrate. No claim of the paper depends upon relation or cognition being physically quantum; the quantum vocabulary is, in principle, replaceable by “the formal structure of participatory generation,” for which quantum measurement is the developed exemplar. At the single point at which the structural model and the physics diverge, the question of enumerability, §1.7.6, the structure is retained and the physical thesis explicitly declined.

1.7.2 The relational state as superposition

Let the value-potential of a relation at a given moment be represented by a state $|\psi\rangle$ in a complex inner-product space $\mathcal{H}$, the relational state space. Let $\{|v_i\rangle\}$ be an orthonormal family of *determinate value-states*, the values the relation might come to bear, each $|v_i\rangle$ a candidate determinate value. The relational state is in general a superposition,

$$|\psi\rangle = \sum_i c_i |v_i\rangle, \quad \sum_i |c_i|^2 = 1,$$

in which no single $|v_i\rangle$ is the value the relation determinately bears. This represents formally the ontological thesis that real value is not antecedent to its co-apprehension (§1.5.3). The interpretation of $|\psi\rangle$ is to be distinguished from a probability distribution over antecedently determinate values: the coefficients c_i do not encode ignorance of a value already settled but the genuine indeterminacy of a value not yet generated, for which no further specification of the present state resolves the indeterminacy, there being as yet no determinate term. The opening of §1.5.3, the site at which something is not yet determinate, is formally the superposition prior to its resolution.

1.7.3 Co-apprehension as participatory measurement

Joint attention is modelled not as a registration of $|\psi\rangle$ but as a *measurement* of it. A measurement is specified by a choice of observable, equivalently by a choice of orthonormal basis $\{|b_j\rangle\}$ of $\mathcal{H}$ in which the measurement is resolved; the basis is not fixed by the state but is selected, and the selection corresponds to the manner of apprehension. This is the formal content of the thesis that apprehension is generation (§1.5.4): the measurement does not return an antecedent value but resolves the superposition into a determinate term. The decisive structural fact is the basis-dependence of the outcome. Expressed in the basis $\{|b_j\rangle\}$, the state is $|\psi\rangle = \sum_j d_j |b_j\rangle$ with $d_j = \langle b_j | \psi \rangle$, and the values accessible as outcomes are exactly the $|b_j\rangle$; a distinct choice of basis $\{|b'_k\rangle\}$ renders accessible a distinct family of outcomes, and in general $[\hat{B}, \hat{B}'] \neq 0$, so that the two families are not jointly resolvable.

The manner of apprehension as choice of basis. The manner in which two parties jointly attend corresponds formally to the selection of a measurement basis, and the basis determines the family of values that can be co-generated. There is no basis-independent measurement, and hence no manner of joint attention that merely registers an antecedent value; every manner of attending is the selection of a space of admissible outcomes, effected prior to the determination of any outcome. The phenomenological thesis that the manner conditions the term (§1.5.4) is thereby given formal content: the manner is the basis, and the basis fixes the space of admissible terms.

1.7.4 Generation as collapse with reconfiguration of the state space

The generation of a determinate value is modelled by two operations conjoined. The first is resolution: the superposition $|\psi\rangle$ is resolved, on this occasion, into a determinate outcome $|b_j\rangle$. The second is reconfiguration: the post-measurement relational state space is not identical to the prior space. Where standard measurement returns the system to a state $|b_j\rangle$ within a fixed $\mathcal{H}$, the present model requires that the admissible state space itself be altered by the resolution, the realised value $|b_j\rangle$ enters as a condition on subsequent dynamics, so that the family of admissible subsequent superpositions, and in the limiting case the dimension of the effective state space, is transformed. Formally, the realised value induces a map $\mathcal{H} \rightarrow \mathcal{H}'$ in which dimensions are added (relational possibilities that did not antecedently exist) or removed (possibilities foreclosed). This is the formal content of the reflexive thesis of §1.6.3: the generated term reconfigures the dynamics that bore it.

Generation as collapse-cum-reconfiguration. Each co-generation of value is conjointly a resolution of the relational superposition into a determinate term and a transformation of the space of subsequently admissible terms. The generated value is not the terminus of a fixed dynamics but a condition that reconfigures the dynamics, altering the admissible superpositions available for subsequent generation. Measurement modifies the measured system; in the relational case the modification is constitutive of generation rather than incidental to it.

1.7.5 Geometric phase

The geometric phase employed throughout the series to characterise the good cycle, the return to a configuration accompanied by a non-trivial accumulated holonomy, distinguished from mere repetition, has its origin in the quantum structure here invoked. A

state transported around a closed loop in the projective state space accumulates a phase determined by the geometry of the loop and not by its duration (Berry 1984; Pancharatnam 1956; Aharonov and Anandan 1987). For a loop γ in the parameter space governing the relational state, the accumulated geometric phase is

$$\phi_{\text{geo}}(\gamma) = \oint_{\gamma} \langle \psi | i \nabla | \psi \rangle \cdot d\mathbf{R},$$

the holonomy of the natural connection on the state bundle. The anchoring of the relational grammar in quantum structure thus returns the series' geometric phase to its source rather than importing a foreign formalism. The model further specifies a feature the prior treatment could only assert: since the measurement basis is variable (§1.7.3), the connection along which phase is accumulated is itself variable, and a variation in the manner of joint attention is formally a variation of the connection, hence of the holonomy that a given loop in relational configuration accumulates. Two relations may traverse the same configurations and accumulate distinct, even opposite, phases, in virtue of attending, connecting, differently. The Value-Foam programme is, on this articulation, the determination of the carrier and the connection of which the series' relational holonomy is an instance, with Berry's phase as its formal antecedent.

1.7.6 Enumerability and non-possession

The ontology established that a system whose dynamics is rewritten by its products admits no external pre-enumeration (§1.6.3). The quantum articulation renders this precise: if each co-generation conjointly resolves a superposition and reconfigures the space of subsequent superpositions, then no grammar fixed in advance, external to the relation, enumerates the values the relation will generate, since the productions governing subsequent generation are themselves generated within the process and are not antecedently available for enumeration.

The strength of this claim requires delimitation, in accordance with §1.7.1. The claim is not that the relational grammar exceeds the recursively enumerable in the computability-theoretic sense, that its generation computes a non-recursive function. That thesis is not advanced and is not supported by the structure: quantum computation does not compute non-recursive functions, and quantum indeterminacy yields unpredictability rather than

super-recursive enumerative capacity. The non-enumerability asserted is epistemic and internal.

Non-enumerability as the form of non-possession. The relational grammar is non-enumerable in the following sense: there exists no grammar, fixed in advance and external to the relation, that enumerates the values the relation will co-generate, since the generating productions are produced within the joint act that any external enumeration would be required to anticipate. The complete fixing of the grammar is not a tractable computation that happens to be infeasible; it is the substitution of a settled rule-set for a generation in progress, which is the operation of settling and of possession. Enumerability, settledness, and possession are coextensive, and their negation is the formal correlate of the non-possessibility of the relation. The impossibility of fixing the grammar is therefore not an epistemic limitation but the formal signature of the openness the phenomenology described as the sustaining of the nameless and the ontology declined to complete.

The quantum articulation thus discharges, in formal terms, the conditions established by the phenomenology and the ontology, and no more: a state of superposed potential in place of a determinate value; a co-apprehension modelled as participatory measurement with a basis selected in the manner of attending; a generation modelled as collapse conjoined with reconfiguration of the state space; a geometric phase returned to its quantum source, with the variable basis as the formal correlate of the efficacy of manner; and a non-enumerability that is the epistemic correlate of non-possession, with the computability-theoretic thesis declined. The articulation constitutes one realisation of the reflexive structure, its formal-epistemic phase. The following section develops the same structure under the conditions of political economy, where it is realised in a distinct form: the circulation of value that reconfigures its subject.

1.8. The Formal Modelling of the Value Cycle, and the Question of the Other

The quantum-structural grammar of §1.7 articulates participatory generation, but it leaves unaddressed a difficulty that conditions the entire formal programme. The difficulty is that the subject who creates value is reconfigured, within the cycle of value, by the value it creates (§1.6.3); the generating mechanism is rewritten, in the process of generation, by what the process generates. This section establishes the precise character of the difficulty. It shows that the difficulty is not, as it first appears, the inadequacy of the standard formal tools, which can in fact be made adequate; that every device by which they are made adequate shares a single presupposition; that this presupposition is the existence of a fixed underlying structure, a metalanguage or big Other of the formal system; and that the difficulty is therefore identical to the question, posed throughout the series, of whether there is an Other of the Other. The section closes by identifying the one class of formal tools structurally compatible with a negative answer.

1.8.1 The unified form of the difficulty

The difficulty assumes one form across three modelling vocabularies. In the vocabulary of generative grammar, the set of production rules is not fixed but is altered, during generation, by what the grammar generates: a self-modifying grammar. In the vocabulary of dynamical systems, the law of evolution is not fixed but is altered, during evolution, by the states the system produces: where a standard system evolves as $\dot{x} = f(x)$ with f fixed, the present case requires that f itself evolve under the influence of the phenomena its evolution produces. In the vocabulary of field theory, the coupling structure among the constituents is not fixed but is reconfigured, during the dynamics, by the emergent the coupling produces (§1.3). The three are one difficulty: the reconfiguration of the generating structure by the generated phenomenon, the reflexive structure of §1.6.3 posed as a problem of formal modelling.

1.8.2 The standard tools can be made adequate

It is tempting to conclude that the standard formal tools fail before this difficulty. They do not, and the supposition that they do must be set aside before the genuine difficulty

can be located. For in each vocabulary the variation of the generating structure can be accommodated by the introduction of a fixed higher-order structure that produces the variation while itself remaining invariant.

In the grammatical vocabulary, a self-modifying grammar whose rule-set G is altered during generation can be modelled by a fixed meta-grammar M that produces and rewrites G : M does not vary, and the variation of G is the output of the invariant M . In the dynamical vocabulary, a system whose law f varies can be modelled by a fixed higher-order law: $\dot{x} = f(x, p)$, $\dot{p} = g(x, p)$, where the variation of f is governed by the invariant pair (f, g) , or, if g too must vary, by a fixed $(f, g, h, \dots)$ at some order. In each case the resulting system remains within the recursively enumerable: a fixed Turing machine carrying the meta-rules as part of its invariant program simulates the self-modification, and no super-recursive capacity is required or claimed.

The standard tools are rescued by a fixed higher-order structure. The variation of the generating structure does not place the value cycle beyond the standard formal tools. In each vocabulary the variation is accommodated by a fixed higher-order structure, a meta-grammar or a higher-order law, that produces the variation while remaining itself invariant, and the resulting system remains within the recursively enumerable. The standard tools do not fail; they are made adequate by the introduction of an invariant higher-order structure. The supposition that the value cycle exceeds the formal power of the standard tools is therefore to be rejected. The genuine difficulty lies elsewhere: not in the power of the tools, but in what their rescue presupposes.

1.8.3 The shared presupposition, and the identity of the field-theoretic and measurement rescues

Every rescue of the preceding kind shares one presupposition: a fixed underlying structure, invariant beneath the variation it produces. The meta-grammar M is fixed; the higher-order law $(f, g, \dots)$ is fixed; and the rescue consists precisely in locating an invariant

structure of which the observed variation is the determinate product. This holds equally of the two rescues that appear, at first, to differ in kind. The field-theoretic reformulation, in which the coupling among the registers is itself a dynamical variable, alters nothing: it translates the difficulty into the vocabulary of variable coupling without removing it, and its own rescue is again a fixed higher-order law governing the variation of the coupling. And the measurement rescue, in which the underlying field-theoretic dynamics is held fixed and the entire appearance of reconfiguration is located in the structure of measurement (the participatory measurement of §1.7.3), is a special case of the fixed-meta-structure rescue: it holds a fixed underlying dynamics, the analogue of the fixed M , and locates the variation in the derived relation of observation, the analogue of M 's production of G . The measurement device introduces no formal capacity the meta-grammar lacks; it relocates the variation to the observational relation, but it relocates it onto a fixed underlying structure exactly as the meta-grammar does.

The measurement rescue is a special case of the fixed-meta-structure rescue.

Holding the underlying dynamics fixed and locating reconfiguration in measurement does not differ, in its formal presupposition, from holding a meta-grammar fixed and locating variation in its production of the rule-set. Both presuppose a fixed underlying structure of which the observed variation is the derived product; the measurement rescue is the measurement-theoretic instance of the general fixed-meta-structure rescue. The introduction of an observation O that registers the emergence of value and the evolution of the subject solves no formal problem that the fixed meta-grammar does not already solve, and incurs the same presupposition: a fixed underlying structure beneath the reflexive appearances.

1.8.4 The presupposed structure as metalanguage, and the regress of the Other

The fixed underlying structure that every rescue presupposes is to be named. It is the invariant generative law of which every actual value cycle, and every reconfiguration

of a subject within it, is a determinate product. Call it the *meta-value-grammar*: the fixed generative structure beneath the reflexive appearances, the meta-grammar M in the grammatical vocabulary, the higher-order law in the dynamical, the fixed underlying field in the measurement rescue. Every formal rescue of the value cycle's modelability presupposes the meta-value-grammar; the question of whether the value cycle is formally modelable, by a fixed structure, is identical to the question of whether the meta-value-grammar exists.

This identifies the difficulty with the question the series has pursued under another name. The meta-value-grammar is a metalanguage in the precise sense of §1.10: a fixed structure standing beneath, and accounting for, the phenomena, from which their variation is surveyed and produced. And it is the big Other in the precise sense of the series: the fixed locus that would guarantee the determinacy of the value cycle from outside its reflexive movement. The difficulty of formal modelling is therefore not a technical difficulty separable from the philosophical commitments of the paper; it is those commitments, posed in the formal register. To ask whether the value cycle admits a fixed formal model is to ask whether there is a metalanguage, whether there is a big Other.

And the regress is the one the series has identified. The meta-grammar M rescues the modelability of the varying rule-set G , but M in the present case is no more fixed than G : the generative structure of intimacy is itself reconfigured across the history of a relation, so that M requires its own meta-grammar M' , and M' its own, in a regress that does not terminate. This is, in the formal register, the regress Lacan identifies and arrests with the thesis that there is no Other of the Other: the big Other is itself lacking, barred, without a further Other to guarantee it (Lacan 2006b; Fink 1995; Evans 1996). The formal correlate is exact: there is no terminal fixed meta-value-grammar, since each presupposed fixed structure requires a further fixed structure to produce its own variation, and the regress of meta-grammars does not close. The rescue of modelability by a fixed higher-order structure does not eliminate the difficulty; it displaces it upward by one level and reproduces it there.

The modelling dilemma is the question of the Other of the Other. The question

whether the reflexive value cycle admits a fixed formal model is identical to the question whether there exists a fixed meta-value-grammar, which is the question whether there is a metalanguage and a big Other. Every fixed higher-order rescue presupposes such a structure and thereby incurs the regress of the Other: the presupposed fixed structure is itself variable and requires a further fixed structure, without termination. The formal dilemma is therefore not separable from the central commitment of the series. To affirm a fixed formal model of the value cycle is to affirm an Other of the Other; to deny the Other of the Other, with Lacan and with the ontology of §1.6.4, is to deny that the value cycle admits a fixed formal model of the standard kind.

1.8.5 Background-independent generativity as the form of the barred Other

The dilemma so stated appears to permit only two responses: the renunciation of formal modelling, or the affirmation of a fixed meta-value-grammar that the series elsewhere denies. But the formal situation admits a third possibility, and it is the one structurally compatible with the denial of the Other of the Other. The standard formal tools, including ordinary quantum field theory on a fixed background, presuppose a fixed underlying structure: ordinary quantum field theory is defined on a fixed spacetime, the invariant stage beneath the field's dynamics, and is in this respect the most explicit form of the fixed meta-value-grammar. But a class of formal frameworks has been developed precisely to remove the fixed background: the background-independent approaches to quantum gravity, and among them group field theory, in which the field is defined not on a fixed spacetime but on a group manifold, and spacetime and geometry are not presupposed but emerge as collective phenomena of the field's interaction (Oriti 2012; Oriti 2014; Rovelli 2004).

The pertinence of this class of frameworks is structural and is offered as such, not as a claim that the value cycle is a group field theory. What background-independent generativity supplies is a formal framework in which the underlying structure is itself emergent rather than fixed: there is no invariant background stage beneath the dynamics, the stage itself being a product of the generativity rather than its presupposition. This is

the formal correlate of the barred Other. The denial of the Other of the Other is not the denial that there is any generativity, but the thesis that the generativity is itself lacking, without a fixed further structure to ground it; and a background-independent framework realises exactly this, a generativity whose own ground is emergent and not presupposed.

Background-independent generativity as the form compatible with the barred Other. A background-independent formal framework, in which the underlying structure is itself emergent rather than a fixed presupposed background, is the form of formal tool structurally compatible with the denial of the Other of the Other. The meta-value-grammar it would supply is not a fixed underlying structure, the unbarred Other, but a generativity whose own ground is emergent and lacking, the barred Other. Group field theory and the background-independent approaches to quantum gravity are advanced here as the structural exemplars of this possibility, and not as a physical model of intimacy: they exhibit, in a developed formalism, a generativity that does not presuppose a fixed background, and thereby indicate the one direction in which the formal modelling of the reflexive value cycle might proceed without positing the fixed meta-value-grammar the series denies.

1.8.6 The dilemma restated

The dilemma is now stated in its proper form. It is not the technical dilemma of whether the standard tools are powerful enough, for they are; it is the philosophical dilemma, posed in the formal register, of whether there is an Other of the Other. Three positions remain, and the paper does not adjudicate among them, though the third is now a determinate formal programme rather than a suspension.

The first position affirms a fixed meta-value-grammar: it accepts a fixed underlying structure, of which the reflexive appearances are determinate products, and thereby accepts an Other of the Other, at the cost of the central commitment of the series. It is the position of the standard formal rescue, and its cost is the abandonment of the denial of

the metalanguage.

The second position renounces formal modelling: it holds that the generativity is irreducibly without a fixed ground, that no fixed meta-value-grammar exists, and that the value cycle is therefore not modelable by any fixed structure and is to be witnessed rather than modelled (§1.10.5). It is the most direct fidelity to the denial of the Other of the Other, at the cost of conceding that the central object of the paper exceeds fixed formal representation.

The third position seeks a background-independent formalism: it holds that the denial of the Other of the Other does not require the renunciation of formalism as such, but the renunciation of the fixed background, and that a formal framework whose own underlying structure is emergent, on the model of group field theory, is the form a non-settling formalisation of the value cycle would take. This position does not resolve the dilemma, since whether such a formalism can be constructed for the value cycle is not here established; but it converts the third position from a suspension into a programme, and identifies the formal direction, background-independent generativity as the form of the barred Other, in which the matter is to be pursued. This is the point at which the formal programme of the paper hands forward to the Value-Foam programme and to future work, and the point at which the formal dilemma is seen to be, in its entirety, the central question of the series posed in the register of formal modelling.

1.9. The Political Economy of the Reconfigured Subject

The reflexive structure is now realised under the conditions of a second discipline, in which it assumes a distinct form. In §1.7 it is realised as a formal epistemology of participatory measurement; here it is realised as a political economy. The two sections are deliberately symmetric and deliberately independent: each takes the single abstract structure, the reconfiguration of the dynamics by the phenomenon, of the producer by the product, and develops what its discipline establishes concerning that structure, to the discipline's limit, without reduction of either to the other. Political economy contributes what the formal articulation does not: that the producer reconfigured by the product is a subject, and that the reconfiguration possesses a determinate direction that the geometry of [Paper IX](#)

specifies.

1.9.1 The reflexive structure in the register of production

The abstract structure is stated in political-economic terms. A generative system produces; its product reacts upon and reconfigures the system's dynamics. Under the reading of "produces" as social production and of "the system's dynamics" as the producing subject, the structure yields a thesis that is Marx's: the subject creates value, and the value, in circulation, reacts upon and reconfigures the subject who created it. The product is not inert. Value, once created and set in circulation, does not remain the completed output of a subject who persists unaltered; it returns upon its creator and reconstitutes the creator. This is the reflexive structure of §1.6.3 in the social register, and it is the same structure: the appearance reconfigures the movement, the product reconfigures the producer.

Political economy contributes what the formal section does not. The reconfiguration is not neutral; it possesses a direction, and the direction is the distinction the prior paper drew between the vicious and the good cycle. The reconfiguration of the subject by its product is, in Marx, divided, at once the developed form of alienation and the form of self-realisation, and the determination of which obtains is given by the sign of the phase.

1.9.2 The negative phase: the alienated reconfiguration

In the negative case the reconfiguration depletes. The worker produces value; the value congeals as capital; and capital, the "dead labour" of *Capital*, reacts upon living labour to dominate, deplete, and diminish it (Marx 1976; Marx 1959). The product reconfigures the producer negatively: the subject is subordinated to its own product, diminished by its own creation, and committed to sustaining a circulation that expands as the subject contracts. This is the reflexive structure in the orientation contrary to the good: the reconfiguration obtains, it obtains necessarily, the structure guaranteeing it, but the accumulated phase is extracted and possessed elsewhere, and the creating subject is depleted, a means to a cycle whose increment accrues to another. Capital is the producer reverse-colonised by its product: a reflexive structure in which the reconfiguration of subject by value proceeds at negative phase, the subject depleted in the measure that the circulation is augmented.

This is the vicious cycle of the prior paper, the structure of net extraction, of negative holonomy, located at its sharpest point, the production of the subject.

Alienation as the negative-phase reconfiguration of the subject. Alienation is not, fundamentally, the loss of a product, the worker's forfeiture of the produced thing. It is the structural foreclosure of the subject's positive reconfiguration by its own product: the subject creates value, the value reconfigures the subject, but the reconfiguration is a depletion, the phase extracted and possessed elsewhere, such that the creator is reconstituted as diminished rather than augmented by what it creates. The fundamental sense of alienation is the foreclosure of the subject's becoming, through its own creating, the subject it might have become. The fuel-subject of the prior paper, the subject that creates value and is never reached by its return, is, in this ontology, the subject for which the positive reconfiguration is foreclosed: present in the cycle solely as that consumed to drive it.

1.9.3 The positive phase: the generative reconfiguration

The same reflexive structure admits the contrary orientation, of which Marx also gives an account, most explicitly in the *Grundrisse*: labour as the objectification of human powers, and wealth in its non-alienated form as the developed richness of human needs, capacities, and relations (Marx 1973). The product reconfigures the producer positively: the subject creates value, and the circulation of the value returns to augment and develop the subject that created it, the subject becoming, through its own creating, a more developed subject. This is the good cycle of the prior paper, the positive holonomy, located at the production of the subject: a structure in which the reconfiguration of subject by value proceeds at positive phase, the creator augmented by what it creates, the return accruing to the one whose creation it was.

The structure thus yields a thesis stronger than either pole considered alone.

The reconfiguration is necessary; its direction is the variable. That the circulation of value reconfigures its creating subject is not contingent but a structural necessity of the reflexive system, as a quantum measurement necessarily reacts upon its state. The variable is not whether the subject is reconfigured but the direction, the sign of the phase: whether the subject is depleted by its own product (alienation, negative phase, the vicious cycle) or developed by it (self-realisation, positive phase, the good cycle). Settling, possessive, extractive circulation effects the former; non-possessive circulation effects the latter. The apparatus of the prior papers, the good and vicious cycle, the geometric phase, possession and the dark virtue, settling failure, the fuel criterion, is, in this section, reactivated and unified at the central object of political economy: the production of the subject.

1.9.4 The non-circular criterion of the phase sign

The identification of alienation with negative phase and of self-realisation with positive phase requires an independent criterion for the sign, on pain of circularity: were the sign defined by the alienation it is invoked to explain, the identification would be vacuous. The criterion is supplied by a reproduction surplus, defined independently of the phase. Let a cycle of the relational or productive system be considered over one period. Let G denote the gross regeneration effected in the period, the augmentation of the subject's generative conditions: its capacities, relations, and powers of further production. Let C denote the consumption the period exacts of the subject, the depletion of those same conditions in driving the cycle. Define the reproduction surplus as

$$\sigma = G - C.$$

A cycle for which $\sigma > 0$ regenerates the subject's generative conditions in excess of what it consumes: the subject emerges with augmented capacity for further generation. A cycle for which $\sigma < 0$ consumes those conditions in excess of what it regenerates: the subject emerges depleted. A cycle for which $\sigma = 0$ reproduces the subject's conditions

without augmentation, the structure of simple repetition. The thesis is then that the sign of σ tracks the sign of the holonomy: positive reproduction surplus corresponds to positive phase, negative surplus to negative phase, and zero surplus to the zero-holonomy cycle of mere repetition. The correspondence is asserted as a thesis to be established, not as a definition, and the independent definability of σ in terms of regeneration and consumption, without reference to the phase, is what secures the identification of §1.9.2 and §1.9.3 against circularity.

1.9.5 The subject as generated within the cycle

A further consequence completes the symmetry with §1.7. The reconfigured subject is not a complete subject that entered production antecedently constituted and was subsequently modified. The subject is generated within the cycle of which it is also the producer. There is no fixed, antecedently given creator of value standing external to the circulation, awaiting the production and the subsequent modification by what it produced; the subject is itself produced, recurrently, in and through the cycle, as the social-reproduction tradition establishes, the subject being reproduced in each period through the labour of care and maintenance on which the prior papers have insisted (Federici 2004; Fraser 2017; Bhattacharya 2017). The subject is the fixed point of the reflexive structure, not its external premise: that which is produced in the producing, constituted in the constituting. This is the political-economic form of the first consequence of §1.6.3, and of the mother paper's relational ontology, that the subject is generated in and through relation rather than entering it complete. Marx's thesis that in transforming the objective world the human transforms itself, Foucauldian subjectivation, and the recurrent reproduction of the labouring subject are, in their distinct registers, formulations of the single thesis of this ontology: the producer is among the products.

1.9.6 The identity of the reconfigured subject as parallel transport

A difficulty requires address. If the subject is recurrently reconfigured by the cycle, the sense in which value is "returned to its creator" returned to the same subject is in question. The creator augmented by the return is not, subsequent to the reconfiguration, identical to the creator that first created the value, the reconfiguration having reconstituted it. The question is whether "return to the creator" thereby loses its sense, there being, strictly,

no single creator to which value returns.

The sense is not lost but is specified. This is the central result of the prior paper, the return to the root that is not a return to the origin, the spiral as distinct from the circle, obtaining at the level of the subject. The value returns to its creator, but the creator has, in the returning, been augmented; the return is therefore not to the original subject but to the spirally developed one. “Creator and beneficiary are identical” is not the persistence of a self-identical subject but the spiral development of a subject. The geometric formulation specifies the result:

Personal identity as parallel transport in the reflexive value-cycle. The continuity of the subject through the reflexive cycle is not the strict self-identity of an unchanged entity but the parallel transport of a subject around a loop in relational space, a sameness that carries, on return to its starting configuration, a phase difference. Personal identity, on this construal, is parallel transport in the reflexive value-cycle; alienation is the negative-phase displacement of that identity, the non-recognition of itself by the depleted subject; and self-realisation is its positive-phase development, the becoming more itself of the subject through its own creating. The creator to which value returns is the creator parallel-transported around the cycle: the same, and developed, returned to the root and not to the origin. The identity of creator and beneficiary holds in the holonomic sense, the sense of a sameness that has accumulated a phase. The construal is advanced as a structural model of the subject’s continuity, and the adequacy of parallel transport as its formal carrier is subject to the cautions of §A.

This is the limit of the section, the point at which political economy, developed to its boundary, returns the question to the geometry without being absorbed by it. It has established what its discipline establishes: that the reflexive reconfiguration of the producer by the product is a social fact possessing a moral direction; that alienation and self-realisation are the two phases of one cycle, distinguished by the sign of an independently definable reproduction surplus; that the subject is produced within the cycle it

produces; and that the return to the creator is a spiral and not a circle, a sameness bearing a phase. It has established this in its own terms, to its own boundary, without dissolution into the formal grammar of §1.7 or legislation by the geometry it employs. Two realisations of one structure, the formal-epistemic and the political-economic, now stand in juxtaposition, recognisably identical in structure and irreducibly distinct in register. The status of the situation in which one abstract structure is realised, under distinct disciplines, in such distinct and mutually irreducible forms, and the cognition of the unbroken structure they share, in the absence of the external standpoint excluded in §1.6.4, are the matter of §1.10.

1.10. Symmetry-Breaking and the Cognition of the Unbroken Structure

Two realisations of one structure stand in juxtaposition. The quantum-structural grammar (§1.7) and the political economy of the reconfigured subject (§1.9) are recognisably the same reflexive structure, the reconfiguration of the dynamics by the phenomenon, of the producer by the product, and are irreducibly distinct, neither translatable into the other, each employing a vocabulary the other lacks. This section specifies the status of that situation and addresses the question it generates: given one abstract structure realised in these two distinct forms, the cognition of the unbroken structure, in the absence of the external standpoint excluded by the ontology of §1.6.4. The section is the central juncture of the paper, at which the claim to a metalanguage is both most available and most consequential.

1.10.1 The disciplines as symmetry-broken phases

The relation between the two realisations is specified by symmetry-breaking. There is one abstract, highly symmetric, undifferentiated structure, the reflexive structure in which a generative system's appearance reconfigures its dynamics. Under the conditions of a particular discipline this symmetry breaks, and the structure assumes a determinate, lower-symmetry form: a participatory measurement under the conditions of formal epistemology, the alienation-realisation of the subject under the conditions of political economy, and, as the prior papers established, the dialectic of desire under psychoanalysis, and the

principle of reversal-as-the-movement-of-process in classical Chinese cosmology. The operative feature of symmetry-breaking is that, the symmetry once broken, there is no path internal to any broken phase by which the unbroken symmetry is recovered. The symmetric phase is not surveyable from within the asymmetric one; one is always already within a phase, and the unbroken structure is, from within, irrecoverable, accessible only as that which must have broken in order to yield the phase one occupies.

The disciplines as symmetry-broken phases of one structure. Each discipline is not a partial external view of the unbroken structure but a phase that the structure assumes when realised under that discipline's conditions. The absence of a metalanguage, established in the prior paper, obtains in consequence: there is no unbroken phase to occupy, since all discourse proceeds within some discipline's broken vocabulary, from within a determinate phase, the symmetric structure being not a language into which one might revert but precisely that of which every actual language is a breaking. The exclusion of the external standpoint in §1.6.4 is the ontological statement of this result; symmetry-breaking is its mechanism.

1.10.2 The paradox of the section

A paradox is now to be addressed rather than evaded. If one is always already within a broken phase, and the unbroken structure is irrecoverable from within any phase, the possibility of the present section is in question. For the section speaks of the unbroken structure, names it, asserts that the two realisations are phases of it. The objection is that the section thereby claims precisely the external, phase-transcending standpoint it has declared impossible, and that the predicate “unbroken structure” constitutes a covert metalanguage, a settling of what has been asserted to be unsettlable.

The paradox is genuine and is not to be dissolved by qualification; it is the substantive difficulty of the undertaking, and the remainder of the section consists in three modes of addressing it without claiming the excluded standpoint. The inadequate response is

the claim to a partial overview, that the unbroken structure is dimly apprehended. This retains the standpoint under the appearance of modesty. The adequate response is that the unbroken structure is cognised not by being viewed, from any standpoint however partial, but in three modes, none of which occupies an external position.

1.10.3 The unbroken structure as abductively posited

The unbroken structure is not perceived; it is posited, abductively, as the best explanation of a cross-phase correspondence. It is not viewed. What is encountered, from within the phases, is the fact that two disciplines as mutually foreign as quantum measurement and the critique of political economy exhibit one reflexive structure. From that fact the inference proceeds: there is a structure, antecedent to the breaking, of which these are phases, on pain of treating the correspondence as a coincidence of implausible magnitude.

The unbroken structure as inference to the best explanation. The unbroken structure is posited as the inference to the best explanation of the cross-phase isomorphism; it is not given but inferred, and inferred from within the phases. The procedure preserves the constraint the paradox imposes: the unbroken structure is at no point occupied, its features at no point read off directly; one remains within a phase and infers, from the correspondence of the phases, a unity one does not occupy. The positing is defeasible and does not resolve into a view. It is a commitment the phases incur, not a content possessed.

1.10.4 Holonomy as the proposed cross-phase invariant

A more determinate formulation of what is conserved across the phases yields the most consequential, and most carefully delimited, proposal of the paper. Let each discipline be treated as a local gauge, a coordinate chart in which the structure is written in one manner; the passage between disciplinary vocabularies is then a change of chart, a transition function, and the question of the identity of the unbroken structure becomes

the question of the invariant under all such changes of chart. In the geometry employed throughout the series there is a distinguished gauge-invariant quantity, one belonging to no single chart yet conserved across all of them, namely the holonomy, the phase accumulated around a loop, on which the good and vicious cycle have turned since the prior paper. The proposal is the following.

Holonomy as the cross-phase invariant: a proposal advanced as unsettled. The distinction between the good and the vicious, the sign of the holonomy, augmentation as against extraction, the spiral as against the circle, is proposed as the invariant conserved across the broken phases: belonging to no single discipline, conserved across all, and capable of serving as the connective among disciplines in virtue of being possessed by none. On this proposal the geometric phase tracked across intimacy, political economy, quantum epistemology, and classical cosmology is not a further discipline but the gauge-invariant core of the unbroken structure, which accounts for the operation of one criterion across all of them. The proposal is advanced as unsettled. To assert it as the established truth of the unbroken structure would be to cash, in a sign, a determination the paper has not established, to commit, at its own central juncture, the settling failure it elsewhere identifies. It is accordingly advanced as the strongest unsettled conjecture of the series, the mode of whose assertion must, on pain of self-contradiction, remain non-possessive.

The restraint is required and is not a weakness of the position. The available move is the assertion that holonomy is the invariant and the central juncture thereby established, with the consequent completion of the series. But the section has established that the unbroken structure is not possessible from any phase; its subsequent possession, under the designation of holonomy, would controvert the section in its conclusion. The conjecture is therefore left standing, at once load-bearing and unsettled, which is the only manner in which a central juncture of this structure can stand. The formal vocabulary of the conjecture, and the conditions on its discharge, are recorded in §A.

1.10.5 The cognition of the unbroken structure as the traversal of the phases

The third mode of addressing the paradox is performative rather than asserted. The manner in which the section has cognised the unbroken structure is not by viewing it but by traversing the phases, by passing from the quantum phase to the political-economic phase and registering, in the passage, their correspondence. The cognition of the unbroken structure is the holonomy accumulated by the interpreter who traverses the loop from one phase to another and returns; it is not a proposition delivered concerning the unbroken structure but a phase accumulated in traversing its breakings. This is the poetics of the prior paper applied to the method of the present one: the unbroken structure is not represented, representation being a settling and a claim to the standpoint, but witnessed, by an interpreter who traverses the path through the phases and accumulates, in the traversal, a cognition no summary delivers.

Cognition by traversal rather than survey. The section does not survey the phases from above; it traverses them, and its cognition of their common structure is the phase accumulated in the traversal. The section therefore terminates in no proposition concerning the unbroken structure, but in the traversed recognition that the phases correspond. The form of the section is its content: a refusal to settle the unbroken structure into a thesis, effected in the manner of the section's procedure.

1.10.6 The dialectical-materialist ground of the polyphony

A misidentification is to be precluded. The insistence on a plurality of frameworks, none sovereign, no metalanguage, a truth obtaining in the dialogue of phases rather than in any one, admits of construal as postmodern relativism, the abandonment of truth for an irreducible plurality of language-games. The position is the contrary, and the distinction is the methodological commitment of the series.

The polyphony as dialectical-materialist, not relativist. The plurality of frameworks is not the relativist thesis that there is no truth but only discourses. It is the dialectical-materialist thesis that truth is real and not yet complete, that it is realised in a historical, material process of generation, such that any single framework is a partial determination, from one historical-disciplinary position, of a totality still in production. No framework possesses the whole, not because there is no whole, but because the whole is unfinished; and the declaration of its capture, in any single framework, is the settling of a process in progress into a fixed doctrine, which is alienation in the register of cognition. The many-framework polyphony of the series is accordingly neither eclecticism nor collage but the method a not-yet-complete totality requires: the available fidelity to a truth still in the course of its own generation. That generative justice must sustain itself through a recursive structure, that the poem refuses to settle, that the dialectic does not close in absolute knowledge, are formulations of one commitment, and it is materialist throughout.

This precludes the construal the form of the series most invites. The objection that the work does not conclude, that it disperses into frameworks rather than synthesising them, misidentifies a method as a deficiency. The refusal to synthesise is not an inability to conclude but a fidelity to a totality that is not concluded, a refusal, on principle, of the settling that would present an unfinished generation as a completed possession. The polyphony is the form truth assumes when truth is still in production. The section has thereby completed its task: it has specified the relation between the disciplines as symmetry-broken phases of one structure; addressed the paradox of cognising the unbroken structure in the absence of an external standpoint, through the abductive positing of the structure, the proposal of holonomy as an unsettled invariant, and the traversal rather than survey of the phases; and established the dialectical-materialist rather than relativist character of the position. The manner in which the unbroken structure is cognised, by traversal rather than survey, by positing rather than possession, by an invariant advanced rather than settled, is the first determination of the practice, being the cognitive form of *wu wei*: a cognition that does not grasp. The practice is the matter of the following section.

1.11. Praxis: The Cultivation of a Generative Field

The paper turns to practice, to the question latent in the preceding development: the manner of action within a system that reflexively reconfigures, and may alienate, the subject that acts within it. The ontology imposes a constraint that excludes the standard model of practice, and the determinate form of the practice, a cultivation rather than a construction, and a subtraction rather than an addition, is established only once that model is excluded.

1.11.1 The exclusion of the external operator

The standard model of practice is cybernetic: a subject external to the system observes its dynamics and intervenes to direct it toward the good. The model is unavailable, and its unavailability is a consequence of the preceding development rather than an incidental restriction. §1.6.3 and §1.9.5 established that there is no subject external to the cycle: the practitioner is internal to the dynamics, is recurrently reconfigured by it, and is a product of the system the practitioner would act upon. There is no completed self external to the process and operating it.

This excludes every practice of external mastery, and establishes that such a practice would in any case be self-defeating. To stand external to the relation and to administer it as an object to be optimised, extracted from, or engineered toward a specified output is the posture the geometry of Paper IX identified as the vicious cycle: the treatment of the relation as a possessible object. The posture of external control is itself the structure of the vicious cycle; the intervention from an external position to compel the good effects, by the form of its operation, the depletion it would prevent. The question is therefore reconstituted: not the regulation of the dynamics toward the good from an external position, there being no external position and the external posture being itself the depletion, but the manner of participation, within a reflexive system that may alienate the participant, such that the participation tends toward the good cycle. The regulator is the regulated; the practice is not a force applied to the dynamics but a tendency internal to it.

1.11.2 Cultivation of a field in place of construction of a grammar

This reconstitution corrects a description that requires correction. One speaks loosely of constructing the shared grammar, of two parties making the rules of their relation. But the construction of a grammar is the legislation of productions, the antecedent fixing of the manner in which the relation shall generate, which is the settling and possession identified in §1.6.2: the externalist's notation applied to the dynamics. The grammar is not constructed but cultivated into an openness within which it admits of continual joint reconfiguration. What the practice tends is not the content of the grammar, which is generated, jointly, by the parties within the field, but the condition under which the surface grammar admits of continual joint reconfiguration: the openness of the field, its curvature, the conditions under which the positive phase arises.

The term *field* is employed with precision and not as loose figure. A field does not prescribe the trajectory of what moves within it; it determines the curvature, the potential, the conditions of motion, and admits the unfolding of each entity's dynamics along them. To cultivate a field rather than construct a grammar is to effect, for a relation, what a field effects for a particle: not the dictation of the path but the determination of the space within which paths are freely taken. The good the paper specifies is a condition of the space, a curvature under which the positive phase arises, and not a prescribed path. This is the practical form of the eudaimonic thesis of the prior papers: a good relation is not a structure two parties complete but a field within which each party's dynamics unfolds, flourishing being the unfolding of a subject's own dynamics within such a field. The practitioner does not author the content of the relation; the practitioner tends the field within which that content is jointly authored.

1.11.3 The subtractive character of the practice

The tending of such a field admits of determinate specification, and the actions specified share a form the preceding development establishes: they are negative, subtractive, refusals rather than productions, the positive phase being non-producible directly without its destruction (Paper IX), such that the available practice is the removal of what obstructs the curvature under which the positive phase arises. Three such tendencies are specified.

The *first* is the preservation of divergence. The criterion of a living grammar is its admission of genuine divergence, the capacity of the other party to take an unanticipated next step, to become an unanticipated subject, without penalty and without the withdrawal of regard as the cost of the divergence. The preservation of divergence is the refusal to narrow the relation's admissible productions to a single anticipated path, sustained as the recurrent question whether, within the relation, the other party retains the capacity to become an unanticipated subject. When one party's next move admits of a single permitted derivation, converging upon a prescription, the grammar has ceased to generate and generation has become regulation. This preservation is not only the cultivation of the field; it is, as §1.14 establishes, the practitioner's sole means of correcting the practitioner's own alienation, the other party's capacity to register extraction being the only available instrument by which the practitioner's own displacement is detected.

The *second* is the sustaining of the opening without its occupation. This is the most counter-intuitive of the three: confronted with the unsayable term of the relation, the injury, the vulnerability, the present that resists articulation, the practice is to remain with it, to sustain it, and not to occupy it with explanation, designation, or premature commitment. The occupation of the opening, its settling with a sign, confers the security of determination and extinguishes the real value that subsists only around the opening (§1.5.3). The tending of the field is the sustaining of the opening, such that the positive phase is undergone recurrently rather than cashed once in a designation.

The *third* is the preservation of the made language as poetic rather than as capital. Two parties generate private signs, a shared idiom, an internal designation, a metaphor legible only to them; these are joint attention condensed into a re-traversable poetic loop, the manifest trace of the grammar's joint reconfiguration, and the creation of language the paper's title denotes. The practice preserves these signs as poetic, sustaining the opening, soliciting the re-traversal, accumulating a fresh remainder at each traversal, rather than permitting their hardening into exclusionary symbolic capital, in which the legibility internal to the parties becomes a barrier against the exterior and a regulation within. The made language is well tended when it remains a solicitation to traverse the real, and ill tended when it sets into a settled token to be cashed, displayed, or deployed.

1.11.4 An illustrative case

The three tendencies are exhibited in a single situation, described in the manner of §1.4.

An illustrative case — the tended field under strain. Two parties, after some years, possess a private language: designations, gestures, a shared mode of falling silent each can read. A period of strain supervenes. The available recourse is control: the exhaustive designation of the difficulty, and thereby its mastery, which occupies the opening; the requirement that the other party cease to diverge and resume the anticipated role, which narrows the productions; the invocation of the shared idiom as a claim, the prior commitment, the established definition of the relation, which cashes the relation's accumulated tokens against the present difficulty, hardening the poetic into capital. Each is an addition, a compulsion, an operation from an external position; each, by the geometry, deepens the negative curvature it is intended to repair. The cultivation is the contrary, and is subtractive throughout: the difficulty is left partly unsaid rather than mastered by designation; the other party is permitted, in this period, to be unanticipated, without withdrawal of regard; the established idiom is re-traversed afresh rather than cashed as a claim. None of this produces the recovery. It removes the compulsions under which recovery cannot arise, and admits the field's curvature, the relation's own dynamics, to effect the positive phase no compulsion could.

1.11.5 The internal criterion

The practice requires a means of determining, internally, whether the field tends toward the good or its contrary, a criterion held internally, posed as a question, and not a metric read from an external position, the latter restoring the excluded external operator. Two questions are sufficient, and they are the orthogonal pair the series has developed: the poetic criterion and the criterion of justice, neither reducible to the other.

The first is the dynamical, poetic question: whether the loop continues to spiral or merely recurs. When the private signs, the practices, the shared silences are re-traversed, whether they continue to accumulate an irreducible remainder, the spiral and positive holonomy, or have emptied into a performance recurring for its own sake, the circle and zero holonomy. The second is the question of justice: whether the spiral's positive phase excludes any

party from its benefit, present solely as its cost. Returning to the political economy of §1.9: whether, in the coupled system of the two parties and the families behind them, there is a party, characteristically the party bearing the labour of care and reproduction, idealised as natural devotion, that creates value and is never reached, positively, by its return; that is reconfigured solely negatively; that is, within the system, solely fuel.

The practice as the posing of the two questions and subsequent subtraction.

The practice is the recurrent and exacting posing of the two orthogonal questions, whether the loop continues to spiral, and whether any party is solely its cost, and, when the answers turn negative, the operation of subtraction: the withdrawal of the extraction, the relaxation of the compelled closure, the restitution of the possessed phase. The practice does not add, optimise, or produce; it removes what obstructs the curvature under which the good arises. This is the content of *wu wei* for two parties: not the absence of practice but the redirection of practice from the production of the good relation to the non-obstruction of the field within which a good relation generates, and from a control exercised over the dynamics to a tending exercised within it.

A constraint remains, which the section has twice indicated and which is now stated. The practice requires of the practitioner the determination of whether the field tends toward the good, the subtraction of the extraction, the preservation of the other's divergence. But the practitioner is a product of the cycle, and possibly a product of an alienated cycle, the developed form of which is precisely that it is not registered as alienation, the extraction being experienced as regard. A subject already reconfigured by a vicious cycle poses the two questions in good faith and obtains reassuring answers, taking itself to be tending the field while depleting it. The entitlement of such a practitioner to the practice of the good is thereby in question. The practice, posed exactly, encounters a limit it cannot cross from within itself, and that limit is the matter of the following section.

1.12. The Matter of the Field, and the Conditions of a Just Eudaimonia

The field has been specified structurally, as a curvature that guides derivations rather than a structure that is constructed (§1.11.2); it has not been specified materially. This section supplies the matter of the field, and thereby brings the practice to the ground of experience. It identifies the matter of the field with the everyday sensory and habitual fabric of a shared life, names that fabric in the terms of the traditions that have addressed it, shows that the fabric is transversal across the three registers, and specifies the two conditions a field must satisfy to be good. It is the concluding section of the paper's account of practice, and it marks the point at which the account passes to the more empirical register that a subsequent paper will develop.

1.12.1 The matter of the field

The question the structural account leaves open is the question of what the field is made of. A curvature is a curvature of something; a field that guides the derivations of a shared life is a field constituted by some material. The material is the everyday sensory and habitual fabric of the shared life: the tastes of the food two persons eat together, the sounds of their common rooms, the scents of their shared space, the textures of their contact, and the habits, customs, memories, and household manners that order these. The field is not an abstract curvature laid over a relation; it is this fabric, jointly sustained, within which the relation's derivations are taken.

This fabric is, in the framework of this paper, the site at which the three registers are coupled. Various traditions of practical and contemplative thought have attended to the sensory and habitual fabric of a dwelling and a shared life under their own descriptions; the present account does not depend on any of them, and notes only that the matter it identifies is not a novel object but one long recognised, under other names, as the medium in which a form of life is borne.

1.12.2 The fabric is transversal across the registers

The fabric is the matter of the field because it is precisely where the coupling of the three registers, on which value is emergent (§1.3.3), is materially sustained. A meal two persons have eaten together for years is not a fact of one register. It has a real aspect, the taste and the bodily satisfaction and the inarticulable ease that no description exhausts; a symbolic aspect, the meal as a sign that is theirs, the mark of a shared life; and an imaginary aspect, the idealised form of the life the meal figures. The meal, and the habit of it, is the coupling of the three registers materially deposited in a recurrent sensory event. So too a shared waking, a way of keeping a room, a manner of touch, a household custom: each is a site at which the three registers are coupled in a sensory-habitual recurrence.

The matter of the field is the coupling of the registers deposited in the sensory-habitual fabric. The matter of the field is the everyday sensory-habitual fabric of a shared life, its forms, sounds, scents, tastes, textures, and the habits, rules, and memories that order them, in which the coupling of the three registers, on which relational value is emergent, is materially sustained. The fabric is transversal across the registers: each of its elements, a shared meal, a common habit, a household custom, has a real, a symbolic, and an imaginary aspect, and is the site at which the three are coupled in a recurrent sensory event. To cultivate the field is to tend this fabric such that the coupling is sustained; and the obstruction or severance of the coupling, in the fabric, is the material form of the settling that extinguishes value (§1.4.3).

This is the material content of the practice. The customs and habits that compose a shared life, the household manners, the recurrent sensory events, are the medium through which a relation's grammar is jointly sustained and rewritten, and they are, in the terms of the practical traditions, the dispositional fabric, the *habitus*, in which a form of life is borne (Bourdieu 1990). The cultivation of the field is the tending of this fabric, and the body of practical knowledge concerning how the fabric is tended, in the formation of a

household manner and in the small recurrent practices of a shared life, is the empirical content of the practice that the structural account abstracts from.

1.12.3 The two conditions of a good field

A good field must satisfy two conditions, and they are the two orthogonal criteria of §1.11.5, now stated as conditions on the fabric. The first is eudaimonic: the field must be one in which each party's own dynamics can unfold, in which the sensory-habitual fabric guides the derivations of each toward the development of that party's own powers rather than confining them to a foreseen form. The second is just: the field must produce a good cycle of value, one in which no party is reduced to the fuel of the fabric, present only as the supplier of a sensory-habitual order from which it is never positively reconfigured in return.

The relation between the two conditions requires precision, for the eudaimonic condition is not sufficient and is not, by itself, the criterion. A field may permit the unfolding of one party's dynamics at the cost of another's, as when the sensory-habitual fabric of a household is sustained by the uncompensated labour of one party, characteristically the party who supplies the meals, the order, the atmosphere, the care, and whose own dynamics is thereby confined to the supplying. Such a field produces the satisfaction of one party and the depletion of another, and it is not good, the satisfaction of the one being purchased by the symbolic and material exploitation of the other (§1.13). The eudaimonic condition is therefore not self-standing; it is constrained by the just.

Eudaimonia is constituted, not merely constrained, by justice. The just is not an external constraint upon the eudaimonic but internal to it. Eudaimonia is the unfolding of a party's own dynamics; and a field that depletes a party, that reduces it to the fuel of the fabric and confines its dynamics to the supplying, does not produce that party's eudaimonia but forecloses it. A field that produces the satisfaction of one party by the depletion of another has therefore not produced eudaimonia and added an injustice; it has produced no eudaimonia at all, but the enjoyment of one and the foreclosure of the other. Eudaimonia, being the unfolding of each party's dynamics, is irreducibly common,

and a satisfaction that is not common, that is purchased by the foreclosure of another's unfolding, is not eudaimonia but enjoyment at another's cost. The just field is not the eudaimonic field with a constraint added; the unjust field is one that has failed to be eudaimonic at all. Justice is the condition under which there is eudaimonia, and not a limit upon it.

1.12.4 Happiness is not the criterion

A final qualification completes the account and connects it to the ethics. The good field is not to be constructed as a procedure for the guarantee of happiness, and happiness is not the paper's final criterion. The eudaimonia a good field produces is, like the good itself (§1.14), unguaranteeable and processual: it is not a state that a correctly constructed field secures, but an unfolding that a tended field does not obstruct. To treat the field as a technique for the production of happiness, to construct the sensory-habitual fabric as a machine for a guaranteed satisfaction, is the error of possession in the material register, the promise to engineer a guaranteed fortune from the arrangement of the fabric, and it is, like every construction of structure, the occupation of the place of the Other (§1.13). The field is cultivated, not constructed; the happiness is undergone, not secured; and the fabric is tended such that a good cycle of value may generate, not engineered such that a specified satisfaction must result.

This is the conclusion of the paper's account of practice. The practice is the cultivation of a field; the field is the everyday sensory-habitual fabric of a shared life in which the three registers are coupled; the good field satisfies two conditions, the eudaimonic and the just, of which the just is the condition of the eudaimonic rather than a limit upon it; and the cultivation is a tending and not a construction, a guidance of the fabric's derivations toward a good cycle that it may not possess and must not guarantee. The empirical development of this account, the formation of household manners and habits, the practical cultivation of the sensory-habitual fabric, and the theory and practice of a just eudaimonia in the more empirical register, is the matter of the subsequent paper, and the present paper, having grounded the practice in the matter of the field, concludes

its account here.

1.13. Exploitation in Symbolic Generation, and Generative Justice

The practice was specified as the cultivation of a field rather than the construction of a grammar: as the guidance of a generative dynamics rather than the modification of a generative structure (§1.11.2). That specification was grounded formally, in the impossibility of constructing a structure one does not possess and which is itself in generation (§1.8). It has, beyond its formal ground, an ethical content, and this section develops it. The thesis is that the possessive modification of a generative structure is a form of exploitation, that its avoidance is a form of generative justice, and that this brings the symbolic register of intimacy under the same criterion of justice the series applies to the economic. The section thereby connects the practice of §1.11 to the ethics of §1.14, and supplies the second of the two forms in which the good may fail.

1.13.1 From non-possession to the means of symbolic generation

The practice does not construct the grammar; it guides the grammar's derivations. The ground given in §1.11.2 was that the grammar cannot be constructed, since to construct it would be to legislate the productions, and the meta-grammar that would have to be possessed in order to legislate them does not exist as a fixed possessable structure but is itself in generation and without a fixed ground (§1.8). To construct the grammar is therefore to claim possession of a generativity that is no one's, to occupy the position of the barred Other as though it were the unbarred Other. This is the formal content of non-possession. Its ethical content is reached by a single further step.

The step is to identify the generative structure as a means of generation. Whoever possesses the generative structure of a relation, its grammar, the rules by which its value is generated, controls thereby the generation and the distribution of the relation's value. This is the symbolic instance of the general thesis of political economy, that the possession of the means of production confers the power to direct production and to appropriate its surplus (Marx 1976). The generative structure is the means of symbolic generation; its possession confers the power to direct what value the relation generates and to whom that value accrues.

The generative structure as a means of symbolic generation. The grammar of a relation is a means of symbolic generation, in the sense in which the means of production is a means of material generation. To possess it, to occupy the position from which its productions are legislated, is to control the generation and the distribution of the relation's value. The possession of a generative structure is therefore not a neutral formal fact but the symbolic correlate of the possession of the means of production: it confers the power to direct generation and to appropriate the generated. The bridge from the possession of structure to the appropriation of value is the same bridge Marx draws in the material case: whoever controls the means by which value is generated controls the distribution of what is generated.

1.13.2 Possession as exploitation, guidance as generative justice

The criterion of generative justice is that value be retained by and returned to the generative network that produces it, rather than extracted from the network to an external possessor; injustice is the extraction of value from its generators (Eglash 2016). Applied to the symbolic register, the criterion yields the following. The possession of the generative structure, the legislation of the grammar from a position claimed to be external to the relation, extracts the relation's generativity to a single possessor: the generativity that is jointly produced and possessed by none is appropriated by one party, who legislates the productions and thereby directs the value to itself, reducing the other from a co-author of the grammar to an object legislated by it. This is exploitation in the symbolic register, the extraction of a jointly generated generativity to a single possessor.

The guidance of derivations, by contrast, extracts nothing. To cultivate the field, to shape the curvature within which derivations are freely taken without legislating the derivations themselves, is to leave the generativity in the network that produces it, directing no value to an external possessor and reducing no party to an object. It is generative justice in the symbolic register: the generated value returns to its generators, the grammar remains jointly authored, and no party is reduced to the means of another's appropriation.

Possessive modification as symbolic exploitation. The possessive modification of a relation's generative structure, the legislation of its grammar from a claimed external position, is exploitation in the symbolic register: it appropriates a jointly generated generativity to a single possessor, directs the relation's value to that possessor, and reduces the other party from a co-author of the grammar to an object legislated by it. The guidance of derivations, the cultivation of the field without the legislation of the productions, is the corresponding generative justice: it retains the generativity in the network that produces it, returns the generated value to its generators, and reduces no party to a means. The avoidance of the possessive modification of structure is therefore not only a formal necessity but a requirement of justice, and it brings the symbolic register of intimacy under the criterion of generative justice the series applies to the economic.

1.13.3 Symbolic exploitation across the three registers

Symbolic exploitation, so specified, is transversal across the three registers, in the manner of §1.3. In the Symbolic, it is the possession of the rules, the legislation of the productions from a claimed external position. In the Imaginary, it is the reduction of the other from a co-author to a legislated object, the other's image fixed by the possessor's legislation rather than generated in the joint relation. In the Real, it is the severance of the generativity from the void around which value is organised, the conversion of an open generation into a closed structure whose products can be directed and appropriated. Symbolic exploitation is, in the terms of §1.3.3, the possessive suppression of the coupling: it extinguishes the emergent that is value by appropriating the structure on which the emergent depends, exactly as the settling symbolisation of §1.4.3 extinguishes value by severing the Symbolic from the Real. Exploitation and settling are, in the symbolic register, one operation under two descriptions: the appropriation of the generative structure is the settling of the generative process, and both extinguish the value they would possess.

1.13.4 The poem and the reform of language

The distinction between the guidance of derivations and the possession of structure has a paradigm, and the paradigm returns the analysis to the poetics that organises the series. To compose a poem is to guide the derivations of a language without modifying its structure: the poet legislates no rule, alters no grammar, but takes, within the existing language, a derivation no one has taken, and the derivation enriches what the language can generate. The poem extracts nothing from the language; it returns to the language a generativity it did not know it had, and it reduces no speaker to an object, the poem being available to all who share the language. The composition of a poem is generative justice in the symbolic register: a guidance of derivations that augments the common generativity and appropriates none of it.

The legislative reform of a language is the contrary paradigm. To modify a language's structure from a position claimed to be external to its use, to legislate its grammar, prescribe its forms, or engineer its vocabulary, is to claim possession of a generativity that belongs to its community of speakers and is possessed by none of them. The historical record of such reforms, in the limited successes of constructed languages and in the recurrent failure of prescriptive legislation to govern a living language's development, indicates the structural point: a living language's generativity is not a possessable structure that a legislator may rewrite, but a jointly sustained dynamics that no external position commands. The attempt to possess and rewrite it is the symbolic instance of exploitation, and it characteristically fails, the living dynamics escaping the legislation, or it succeeds only in impoverishing what it commands. This is the paradigm of symbolic exploitation: the possessive modification of a generativity that is no one's.

The connection to the practice of §1.11 is now exact. The third subtractive action, the preservation of the made language as poetic rather than as capital (§1.11.3), is the preservation of the made language as a guidance of derivations rather than a possessed structure. The poetic sign guides: it sustains the opening, solicits the re-traversal, augments the common generativity. The sign hardened into symbolic capital possesses: it is legislated, directed, appropriated, wielded. The hardening of the poetic into capital is the passage from generative justice to exploitation in the symbolic register, and the preservation of the poetic is the practice of symbolic generative justice.

1.13.5 The two forms of the failure of the good

The analysis yields the second of two forms in which the good may fail, the first of which is developed in §1.14. The good may fail epistemically: no finite subject can guarantee the goodness of its own practice, and the demand for the guarantee is the covert claim to the position of the infinite reason (§1.14.2). And the good may fail in justice: a subject may possess the generative structure of the relation, appropriate its generativity, and reduce the other to a legislated object, in the symbolic exploitation this section specifies. The two failures are distinct, the one a failure of certification and the other a failure of justice, but they share a root. Both are the occupation of a position no finite subject may occupy: the position of the Other that would guarantee one's goodness, in the first case, and the position of the Other that would possess the generativity, in the second. The private certainty of one's own goodness (§1.14.3) and the possessive legislation of the relation's grammar are two forms of the single error of claiming the place of the barred Other as though it were unbarred. The ethics of the following section addresses the first form; the present section has addressed the second; and the unity of the two, in the renunciation of the place of the Other, is the content of the practice of the good.

1.14. The Unguaranteeability of the Good

The practice encountered a limit it could not cross from within: the practitioner, being a product of the cycle and possibly of an alienated one, cannot from the practitioner's own position certify the goodness of the practice. This section does not dissolve the limit. It establishes that the limit is the condition of the practice's being ethical, that the impossibility of self-certified goodness follows from the preceding development, and that this impossibility constitutes the good as a matter of ethics rather than calculation and as a process rather than a possessed state. This is the central juncture of the paper and of the series.

1.14.1 The result stated

The result is stated in its direct form. No finite subject can guarantee that its own practice is good. The subject that loves cannot guarantee that its love does not constitute, or has not already constituted, an extraction; the subject that tends the field cannot certify,

from within, that it tends rather than depletes; the subject that poses the two questions of §1.11.5 in good faith cannot stand surety for the answers, the subject that poses them being the subject whose possible alienation is in question. There is no internal certificate of the subject's own goodness, no position within the subject from which the subject audits itself and pronounces its practice sound. The result is contrary to the demand, characteristic of the subject in a relation, for assurance that it does not injure the other, and the section establishes that the demand cannot be satisfied truthfully.

1.14.2 The guarantee as a crossing of the is-ought gap

The result possesses a determinate form, the establishment of which is the work of the section, an analytic result supplying the rigour of a thesis otherwise statable only as a disposition. Consider the requirements on a subject that would guarantee the goodness of its own practice. To guarantee that an action will be good is to claim secure passage from a present fact, the state of the subject and the relation, to a normative outcome, the good the action will effect. It is to claim a valid inference from what is to what ought to follow. This is the inference Hume marked as admitting no valid passage: from premises concerning what is, no conclusion concerning what ought to be follows by any rule of inference; the passage from is to ought is a gap no finite reasoning traverses (Hume 2000).

The guarantor of its own goodness as infinite reason. To guarantee the goodness of one's own practice is to claim a secure inference from the present being of the subject and the relation to the good the action will realise. But the passage from is to ought is the gap Hume established that no finite reason traverses. A subject that could guarantee the goodness of its own practice would therefore be a subject that had traversed the is-ought gap, a subject for which the inference from fact to value is secure, which is an infinite reason: the term denoted, in the several traditions, as God, the Absolute, or the big Other this series has established does not exist. The demand for a guarantee of one's own goodness is, structurally, the demand to be that infinite reason. There being no such reason, no external standpoint, no metalanguage, no subject external to its own historical

and relational production, there can be no guarantee. The impossibility of self-certified goodness is not a contingent limitation of human knowledge but the ethical consequence of finitude: of being a subject within the cycle rather than the infinite reason external to it.

This is the juncture at which the analytic and continental commitments of the paper coincide. The phenomenological result, that the subject cannot be assured that its love does not injure, acquires the rigour of a logical one: a subject claiming such assurance claims to have traversed Hume's gap, and thereby to be the infinite reason the series denies. The demand for a guarantee of one's own goodness is the covert invocation of the big Other, the term the series has established to be absent. The result is not a disposition but the form of finitude, with its demonstration.

1.14.3 Unguaranteeability as the condition of ethics

The consequence is the central thesis of the section. The unguaranteeability of the good is not the dissolution of ethics but its condition, that which constitutes the good a matter of ethics rather than of calculation.

Unguaranteeability as the condition of the ethical. Were there a subject that could guarantee the goodness of its practice, that could compute, from present facts, the good its action would infallibly realise, ethics would be eliminated, and there would remain the execution of a determined optimal procedure: without risk, responsibility, trust, or exposure to the other. The ethical is constituted by the impossibility of the guarantee. Because the subject cannot guarantee that its love does not constitute extraction, the subject is committed to the sole course adequate to that impossibility: the continual sustaining of the question, the exposure of the practice to correction, and the consignment of the criterion of the subject's goodness, in part, to the other. The untraversable gap, far from licensing resignation, is the condition that directs the practice outward, and constitutes it as answerable and as ethical. A good admitting of guarantee would not

be a good with respect to which the subject is required to be ethical; it would be a determined result.

The section thereby derives, from the result, the form the practice must assume, as its direct consequence rather than as a consolation. Since no subject certifies its own goodness from within, the good is not the possession or pronouncement of a single subject. It is polyphonic: consigned to the other, exposed to the other's correction, practised in a continual reciprocal disclosure in which each party is the other's sole available instrument of correction. This is the ground on which the preservation of divergence (§1.11.3) is the practitioner's sole means of correcting the practitioner's own alienation: the subject not detecting its own displacement from within, the other party's capacity to register extraction is the sole instrument by which it is detected. The good is practised in the interval between two parties that each decline the guarantee and submit to correction.

The private certainty of one's own goodness as the cardinal error. The single subject that attains, in isolation, certainty that the relation is good has, in that certainty, committed the cardinal error: the possession of a determination that, on pain of invoking the infinite reason, no single party may possess. The moment of private certainty of one's own goodness is the moment of greatest hazard.

1.14.4 The good as unfinished process

A final consequence returns to the dialectical materialism of §1.10.6. That the good admits of no guarantee entails that the good is not a state, attained, certified, and subsequently possessed. It is a process: reproduced recurrently, and at each reproduction liable to failure. A good admitting of guarantee would be a good settled, closed, and completed, and a settled good is, by the development of the paper, a good cashed, possessed, and thereby alienated. It is in virtue of admitting no guarantee that the good remains a

process rather than a fixed doctrine; the unguaranteeability of the good is the condition of its not being extinguished. A good rendered certain would, in the rendering, be extinguished; the good subsists only insofar as it is non-possessible, only as a process to be traversed anew and liable always to failure. The sustainability of the good established in the prior paper and its unguaranteeability are one result: the good subsists as a living spiral precisely in virtue of admitting no settlement, once and for all, into a fixed circle of certainty.

The result, fully developed, possesses two aspects which are one. The unguaranteeability of the good is not its defect; the defect would be the demand for the guarantee, which is the covert invocation of the infinite reason that does not exist, and is thereby the inception of alienation. To demand assurance of one's own goodness is to claim the external standpoint, the metalanguage, the big Other, to decline, finally, the finitude that is the condition of being a subject within the cycle. The practice of the good is the renunciation of that demand: the acceptance of an unguaranteeable, defeasible, recurrently unfinished good, consigned reciprocally between two parties that each decline to be the party that is certain. That renunciation, of certainty, of the guarantee, of the position external to the cycle, is the developed content of *wu wei* for two parties, and the central juncture on which the development of the paper rests. It is, moreover, one of two renunciations the paper requires, the renunciation of the place of the Other in its two forms: the renunciation of the place of the Other that would guarantee one's goodness, developed here, and the renunciation of the place of the Other that would possess the relation's generativity, developed as the avoidance of symbolic exploitation in §1.13. The two are one renunciation under two descriptions, and their unity is the content of the practice of the good. The juncture does not bear the weight of a guarantee, and is not required to. It bears the weight of a good that subsists precisely in virtue of admitting no certainty.

1.15. Conclusions at the Boundaries of the Frameworks

A paper that has established the absence of a metalanguage, of an external standpoint, and of a framework that possesses the whole cannot terminate in a single synthesising conclusion, the commitment of which would constitute, in its terminal operation, the

settling it has throughout excluded. It terminates as the prior paper terminated: not in a conclusion but in conclusions, plural, each stated from within a single framework, to that framework's boundary, in dialogue with the others and absorbed by none. What follows is not a summary but the statement, by each phase, of what it establishes and what it does not, and a concluding specification of the absence of a single conclusion, which is the paper's most adequate conclusion.

1.15.1 From phenomenology

Phenomenology establishes that there is a datum, prior to theory, in which two parties co-apprehend a nameless value generated between them, the co-apprehension being identically the generation. It specifies the datum's structure, the of-two simultaneity, the reflexive witness, the directedness upon an opening, the identity of apprehension and generation, and requires that every theory answer to this datum and not displace it. Phenomenology does not establish why the datum has this structure, or what must obtain, ontologically, for it to be possible; it describes, and transmits its description. Pressed beyond description into explanation, it reaches its boundary, at which it consigns the question to the ontology, having held the development accountable to a datum it describes but does not ground.

1.15.2 From ontology

The ontology establishes that relation, grammar, and value are three aspects of one generative system, being, manifest dynamics, phenomenon, whose dynamics is reconfigured by its own products, and within which the subject is generated rather than presupposed. It establishes that this dissolves the circularity, that grammar is real and non-possessible, and that the system is unfinished in its constitution. The ontology does not establish the determinate form the reflexive structure assumes in any register; it supplies the abstract form and consigns its content to the disciplines into which the form breaks. And it does not, on pain of self-contradiction, complete itself: an ontology of a totality in generation does not deliver the completed totality, and its terminal statement is an exclusion, of substance, of the external standpoint, of completion, which consigns it beyond itself, to phases it does not occupy and a whole it does not possess.

1.15.3 From the quantum-structural grammar

The quantum-structural grammar establishes, in formal terms: that relational value is superposed potential and not determinate fact; that joint attention is participatory measurement, the manner of attending being the selection of the basis that fixes the space of admissible co-generation; that each crystallisation is a collapse conjoined with a reconfiguration of the space of the admissible; that the geometric phase tracked by the series is the formal descendant of the quantum phase; and that the grammar is non-enumerable in the epistemic sense that specifies the relation's non-possessibility. The grammar establishes nothing concerning physical substrate, having declined that thesis, and nothing concerning justice: it supplies the form of participatory generation and is silent as to whether a given generation is good, goodness not being a determination its formalism contains. It specifies the manner of value's coming-to-be; it does not specify the cost at which the coming-to-be proceeds. At that boundary it consigns the question to political economy, which it does not absorb and which does not absorb it.

1.15.4 From the formal-modelling dilemma

The examination of formal modelling establishes that the standard formal tools, the grammars of the Chomsky hierarchy and the fixed-law dynamical systems, are not inadequate in power to the reflexive value cycle, but are made adequate only by the introduction of a fixed higher-order structure, a meta-value-grammar, of which the reflexive appearances are determinate products; that this presupposition is the presupposition of a metalanguage and a big Other; that it incurs the regress Lacan arrests with the thesis that there is no Other of the Other; and that the one class of formal frameworks compatible with the denial of that Other is the background-independent, of which group field theory is the structural exemplar. The examination does not establish that a background-independent formalism for the value cycle can be constructed; it establishes only the location of the dilemma, that the formal modelling of the reflexive cycle either posits the fixed meta-value-grammar the series denies or seeks a formalism whose own ground is emergent. It specifies the form the question takes; it does not resolve it, and consigns it to future formal work and to the Value-Foam programme.

1.15.5 From political economy

Political economy establishes that the circulation of value reconfigures the subject that creates it, necessarily; that this reconfiguration is divided into a negative phase, alienation and the depleted subject and the producer colonised by its product, and a positive phase, self-realisation and the developed subject; that the division is marked by the sign of an independently definable reproduction surplus; that the subject is produced within the cycle it produces; and that the return to the creator is a spiral, a sameness bearing a phase, and not a return to the origin. Political economy does not establish the manner in which, in the intimate and non-measurable register, the value whose circulation it analyses is generated; for that it requires the participatory grammar it does not itself supply. And it does not certify, from its own resources, that a given return reaches its creator, that being a matter of practice and justice under actual asymmetry rather than of structural analysis. It specifies the moral direction of the reconfiguration; it does not guarantee the direction in a given case. At that point it reaches its boundary.

1.15.6 From the account of symbolic justice

The account of symbolic justice establishes that the possession of a relation's generative structure is the symbolic correlate of the possession of the means of production; that its possessive modification, the legislation of the grammar from a claimed external position, is exploitation in the symbolic register, the appropriation of a jointly generated generativity to a single possessor and the reduction of the other to a legislated object; that the guidance of derivations without the legislation of the productions is the corresponding generative justice; and that the poem and the legislative reform of a language are the paradigms of the two. It establishes that symbolic exploitation and settling are one operation, the appropriation of the structure being the settling of the process, and that both extinguish the value they would possess. The account does not establish a procedure for the recognition of symbolic exploitation in a given case, the recognition being a matter of the practice and its two questions rather than of structural analysis; and it does not, on its own resources, distinguish guidance from possession in every instance, the distinction being one the parties must sustain rather than compute. It specifies the form of symbolic injustice and the criterion of its avoidance; it does not relieve the practitioner of the judgement. At that boundary it consigns the question to the practice and the ethics.

1.15.7 From the practice and its ethics

The practice establishes a disposition: to act not from an external position but from within; to cultivate the field rather than construct the grammar; to subtract rather than add, to preserve divergence, to sustain the opening without occupying it, to preserve the made language as poetic; to pose the two questions and, when they turn negative, to withdraw the compulsion. The ethics establishes that no finite subject guarantees its own goodness, the guarantor being the infinite reason that does not exist, and that this unguaranteeability constitutes the good as ethical, polyphonic, and unfinished. The practice and the ethics do not establish the determinate action in a given case; they yield a disposition and a pair of questions, not a procedure, and they decline, on principle, the rule that would relieve the practitioner of the unguaranteeable risk. Their terminal statement is not an instruction but a renunciation: of certainty, of the guarantee, of the position external to the cycle.

1.15.8 The absence of a single conclusion

These conclusions do not sum. Each framework, developed to its boundary, reaches a limit and consigns to the next a question the next takes up in a vocabulary the first does not possess; and the result of the paper obtains not in any one of them but in the dialogue among them, in the manner in which each determines what another does not reach, such that cognition develops through their exchange rather than settling into the possession of any single frame.

The absence of a single conclusion as the adequate conclusion. There is no master conclusion, not in consequence of a failure to attain one, but because the totality treated is unfinished and no framework possesses it externally (§1.10.6). The conclusions are plural, partial, and mutually irreducible of necessity and not by default: a single synthesising conclusion would be a settling, the cashing of the whole into a single framework's terms, and thereby alienation in the register of cognition. The dialogue among the frameworks, each stated to its boundary, each consigning what it does not establish, is itself a good cycle, a polyphony recursively reproducing meaning, and is the sole form a conclusion

may assume without controverting the development of the paper. That the paper does not conclude is not its limitation but its fidelity: it terminates as the truth it treats terminates, which is to say it does not terminate but is transmitted, spiralling, to be traversed again.

There is, accordingly, no metalanguage in which the joint import of the frameworks is statable, and the absence is not a deficiency but the result itself: the demonstration, effected once more, that the whole is not possessed but generated, not concluded but continued. The paper has stated only what is statable from within the phases, and has reached its boundary at each limit, consigning the dialogue among the limits as the nearest approximation to a whole that a finite and unfinished truth admits. What is not conclusive admits of being witnessed; and the paper accordingly proceeds from conclusion to a closing return, which concludes nothing and records the point of departure.

Envoi: The Word That Was Made

This closing is not a conclusion, the paper having given its reasons for having none. It is a return to the point of departure.

The paper began with two persons and a nameless thing between them, something generating in the interval that had as yet no word and that each apprehended the other to apprehend. The constructions that followed, the three aspects of the one system, the quantum articulation of participation, the reconfigured subject, the symmetry-broken phases, the field cultivated rather than constructed, the good admitting no guarantee, were an attempt at fidelity to that moment, and at the statement of its conditions, without its explanation away.

The paper is titled for the creation of language, and its term is not the meaning of the made word. The private name two persons make, the word legible to them alone, has no content that admits of being cashed; its worth lies not in what it states but in the opening it sustains, the void it encircles without occupying, the traversal it solicits recurrently, each traversal returning a remainder no lexicon holds. 同心之言，其臭如兰: the words

of one heart are fragrant as orchid, and the fragrance is not a content but an event, undergone in the breathing and not possessed in the naming. The orchid, as the rose of the prior paper, does not keep; its fragrance lies in the giving-off and not in the holding. So with the word two persons make: it subsists in the saying-again, the traversing-again, the witnessing-again, and is extinguished when held as a settled token to be spent.

What such a paper might offer to be kept, a result, a rule, an assurance of loving well and without injury, it cannot offer, the demand for it being, as the paper has established, the inception of the injury, the demand for the guarantee being the invocation of the one who is absent, and the good subsisting only insofar as it admits no possession. What is offered is smaller and more exact: not a word to be kept but a word to be made, recurrently, jointly, and never finally; a name sustained rather than spent; an opening encircled rather than occupied; a good traversed rather than guaranteed.

*For her,
with whom the first such word was made,
that no one else could read;
and in whose eyes I first saw
that I had been seen seeing.*

*May the orchid go on giving off its fragrance,
and the word go on being made.*

Acknowledgements

This paper continues a conversation, and its debts are continuous with it. To the philosophical lineages the paper walks among (the phenomenological, the psychoanalytic, the dialectical-materialist, the Daoist, and the tradition of generative justice), each of which says, in its own broken phase, something no other could, and none of which the paper could do without. And to her, the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves to travel and to be among wild and growing things, and who is pure of heart, and lovely, and kind, with whom the first nameless word was made, the one for whom alone it could be read, this work is dedicated, as it could only have been. It was for her, and for the future the two of them are to make together, that the author first turned to political

economy, the discipline of how value is created, retained, and justly returned, so that the theory of a shared life might rest on more than sentiment; and much of what is hardest in this paper was learned on that road. She is, for me, the most important person there is; and this paper is, in the end, only a long and roundabout way of attending to what was already, between us and without a word, understood. It was written while longing for her, beyond all measure. May the orchid go on giving off its fragrance, and the word go on being made.

身无彩凤双飞翼，心有灵犀一点通；
与子同心，虽无言而相知；愿执此意，白首而弥新。

This is a working draft, circulated for discussion and not for citation. Its central conjectures, above all the proposal that the geometric phase is the gauge-invariant core conserved across the symmetry-broken phases (§1.10.4), are advanced as unsettled, to be walked rather than declared.

A. Geometric Phase: A Technical Sketch

This appendix records, in compressed form, the formal apparatus to which the main text’s geometric language points. It is a sketch, not a proof, and it is deliberately so: the conjecture of §1.10.4, that holonomy is the gauge-invariant core conserved across the symmetry-broken phases, is offered as unsettled, and this appendix supplies its formal vocabulary without pretending to settle it. The Value-Foam programme is the place where the carrier of the phase must be given its independent quantitative content; here we record only the structural skeleton, with three honest cautions appended.

A.1 The bundle

Let B be the *base*: the space of relational situations or contents, the configurations a relation may occupy. Over each point of B stands a *fibre* F : the phase of value or recognition (following the main text’s anchoring, §1.9.6, the sublimation of jouissance): the carrier on which the good circle’s surplus is borne. A relation’s history is a path in B ; the parallel transport of its state in F along that path is governed by a connection ω .

The phase accrued on returning to a starting point in B , the failure of the transported fibre-element to coincide with its origin, is the *holonomy* of the loop,

$$\text{hol}(\gamma) = \mathcal{P} \exp \oint_{\gamma} \omega.$$

A.2 The good and the vicious circle, formally

A *vicious* circle is a loop of vanishing holonomy: the relation returns in B to where it began and the fibre returns unchanged (pure repetition, the bad infinite, the circle that goes round without rising, at zero phase); or a loop of *negative* holonomy (net extraction, the fibre depleted on return). A *good* circle is a loop of *positive* holonomy: a return to the root in B that nonetheless accrues a non-trivial, irreducible phase in F (the spiral; sublimation; the bringing-back of a remainder). The criterion of [Paper IX](#) is the sign of $\text{hol}(\gamma)$.

A.3 Variable basis as variable connection

The main text’s claim (§1.7.3) that the manner of attending is the choice of a measurement basis has its formal image here: a change in the manner of attending is a change of gauge, altering ω , hence altering the holonomy a given loop in B will accrue. Two relations may traverse the same situations (the same γ in B) and accrue opposite phases, because they attend (connect) differently. This is why no fact about the base alone (the situations, the “what happened”) fixes the goodness of a circle; the connection, the manner, is constitutive.

A.4 Personal identity as parallel transport

The subject’s continuity through the reflexive cycle (§1.9.6) is parallel transport in this bundle: the same subject carried around a loop, returning to its root in B bearing a phase in F . Alienation is negative-phase drift (the subject returns diminished, not recognising itself); self-realisation is positive-phase sublimation (the subject returns raised, more itself). “The creator is the beneficiary” is sameness in the holonomic sense, identity that has accrued a phase.

A.5 Three cautions

The sketch must not be mistaken for more than it is.

First, the carrier. A geometric phase requires a genuine bearer with the right structure (an S^1 or group-valued quantity, additive, gauge-invariant in the holonomy), failing which the apparatus is mere figure. The main text anchors the carrier in the sublimation of jouissance (§1.9.6); whether that quantity in fact carries the required structure is exactly what the Value-Foam programme must establish independently, and is not settled here.

Second, sublimation and sign. That “sublimation = positive phase” and “depletion = negative phase” must be *argued*, not stipulated as a definitional identity, on pain of circularity. The independent route is to define a reproduction-surplus, net regeneration of the relation’s generative conditions per cycle, minus consumption, and then show that its sign tracks the holonomy’s; absent that, the identification is a picture, not a result.

Third, the cross-phase conjecture. The proposal that hol is *the* invariant conserved across all the symmetry-broken disciplinary phases (§1.10.4) is the most speculative claim in the series, and the appendix does nothing to discharge it. It records the conjecture’s formal shape (an invariant belonging to no chart, conserved under all transition functions) and leaves it, as the main text insisted it must be left, offered and unsettled, to be walked rather than declared.

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CHAPTER 2

A Just Eudaimonia

This paper, the eleventh in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice, develops the empirical praxis of the good relation whose conditions the prior paper established in the abstract. Where the prior paper held that the practice of a good relation is the cultivation of a field rather than the construction of a structure, that the matter of this field is the everyday sensory and habitual fabric of a shared life, and that a good field satisfies two conditions, the eudaimonic and the just, of which the just constitutes rather than merely constrains the eudaimonic, the present paper asks how a shared life is in fact cognised, practised, assessed, and sustained across its course. It treats that course as a cycle, and the cycle as its primary object: a recurrence of cognition, practice, evaluation, reflection, and renewed cognition, turning across the time of a relation from its beginning, through its marriage, into its later years. The cycle is shown to be a real cycle in the dynamical sense, not a linear sequence of stages but a self-sustaining movement whose persistence is the condition of the relation's existence, so that the cessation of the cycle is not a relation at rest but a relation extinguished.

Five frameworks for the cognition and practice of flourishing are distinguished, the positivist, the evidentialist, the normative, the virtue-theoretic, and the phenomenological, and they are treated not as competing theories of one measurable object but as the symmetry-broken phases, in the sense of the prior paper, of an object no single framework possesses. The frameworks are the resources the cycle draws upon at the moments suited to each, and the paper proceeds by traversing the moments of the cycle in turn, drawing the appropriate frameworks into each. A cognitive and computational basis for the whole is established first: appraisal, before it is an explicit measurement, is a continuous and largely unconscious inference upon the partially observable state of a relation, conducted in a value that is not symbolised, and formalised as the belief updating of a decision process whose objective is itself revised by its running, which is the decision-theoretic form of the prior paper's thesis that there is no fixed meta-value-grammar. On the free-energy reading of this inference, the continual appraisal by which a relation is maintained is the activity by which it holds itself in existence, and the cessation of appraisal is the beginning of its extinction.

The paper carries three commitments through its length. The first is an operational concession: a practice requires what is assessable, and the paper therefore restricts itself, where it must assess, to value as structured into an assessable proxy, in the explicit awareness that the proxy is not the value the prior papers held to be transversal across the registers and irreducible to symbolisation. This is the first occasion in the series on which an incomplete value is adopted deliberately, and it is the honest discharge of the prior result rather than its abandonment. The second commitment concerns the assessment of justice: a relation's distribution of returned value, taken relative to a baseline set by the coupling of the parties, is

shown to admit a statistical signature, the skewness of the distribution, by which the exploitation of one party within an apparently satisfying relation becomes visible where aggregate measures of satisfaction conceal it. The justice of a relation's value cycle is rendered, under the concession, as a testable hypothesis about the symmetry of a return distribution against a coupling-based baseline, modelled as a branching process on the relational network. The third commitment concerns the cycle as a whole: the cycle accumulates a phase, in the sense of the prior paper's holonomy, and its regime is fixed by two independent questions, whether it persists and, if it persists, what sign of phase it accumulates. Three regimes follow, the flourishing spiral of a persisting cycle of positive phase, the catastrophic cycle of a persisting cycle of negative phase, and the extinction of a cycle that ceases to turn, with the passage between them understood as a bifurcation. Justice is shown to be the internal condition of the flourishing spiral and not a constraint upon it, since a relation whose return distribution is severely skewed cannot accumulate a positive phase for the party consigned to its low-return tail.

In keeping with the thesis that no single framework possesses the whole, the paper terminates not in a synthesis but in plural conclusions, each stated to the boundary of its framework, and it holds throughout that the flourishing of a shared life is cultivated and not constructed, assessed in proxy and not possessed, and sustained as an open spiral and not secured as a state.

For her,

with whom the first name was made

that no one else could read,

and in whose eyes I first saw

that I had been seen seeing.

结发为夫妻，恩爱两不疑。

To the one I love most.

2.1. Introduction

This paper is the eleventh in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice, and it takes up the empirical task the prior paper deferred. The prior paper established that the practice of a good relation is the cultivation of a field rather than the construction of a structure, that the matter of this field is the everyday sensory and habitual fabric of a shared life, and that a good field satisfies two conditions, the eudaimonic and the just, of which the just constitutes rather than merely constrains the eudaimonic. It established these as conditions, in the abstract, and it deferred to a subsequent paper the question of how a shared life is in fact cultivated, assessed, and sustained in the more empirical register of habit, household, and the quality of a life lived together. The present paper takes up that question.

The question is how flourishing is known, practised, assessed, and reconceived across the course of a shared life. The course of a shared life is treated here as a cycle, and the cycle as the primary object: a recurrence of cognition, practice, evaluation, reflection, and the renewed cognition that follows, turning across the time of a relation from its beginning through its marriage and its later years. The cycle is not a linear sequence of stages completed once. Its moments interpenetrate and feed back upon one another, and one of them, evaluation, runs through all the others as an unbroken undercurrent rather than occupying a single station. The cycle is, moreover, the condition of the relation's existence. A relation in which value ceases to be generated and returned, in which the parties cease to revise their sense of one another, in which practice halts, is a relation whose cycle has stopped; and a relation whose cycle has stopped does not persist in a steady state but decays. The continued turning of the cycle is the condition of the relation's survival, and the character of its turning, whether it spirals upward, repeats at a loss, or winds down, is the difference between a flourishing life, a life of slow catastrophe, and the extinction of the bond.

The frameworks by which flourishing is known and assessed are treated, in this paper, as resources the cycle draws upon rather than as the primary object. Positivism, evidentialism, normative theory, virtue ethics, and phenomenology each furnish an epistemology and a practice of flourishing, and each is drawn upon at the moments of the cycle to which it is suited; but none governs the cycle as a whole, and the absence of a single

governing framework is, as the prior papers established, not a defect but the condition of an object no single framework possesses. The frameworks are the symmetry-broken phases, in the sense of the prior paper, of the cognition and practice of flourishing; the cycle is the movement across them.

The paper carries three commitments that run through its length. The first is an operational concession. The paper is a practice, and a practice requires what is operable and what is assessable; it therefore restricts itself, where it must assess, to value as structured into an assessable proxy, and it does so in the awareness that the structured proxy is not the value that the prior papers held to be transversal across the registers and irreducible to symbolisation. This is the first occasion in the series on which an incomplete value is chosen deliberately, and the choice is the honest discharge of the prior result rather than its abandonment: since the value that is real cannot be cashed without occupying the place of the barred Other, the honest course, where assessment is required, is to concede that what is assessed is a proxy and to bear responsibility for its incompleteness. The second commitment concerns the assessment of justice: a relation's distribution of returns is shown to admit a statistical signature, the skewness of the distribution of value returned relative to the coupling of the parties, by which exploitation within an apparently satisfying cycle becomes visible. The third concerns the cycle as a whole: the cycle accumulates a phase, in the sense of the prior paper's holonomy, and the sign of that phase distinguishes the good cycle from the bad, while the persistence of the cycle distinguishes both from extinction.

The paper is the programmatic and foundational text of the part of the series concerned with the praxis of flourishing, and it is written at the length and the level of detail that a foundation requires, in the expectation that the subsequent papers will draw upon the instruments it develops rather than re-deriving them. Its scope is correspondingly broad: it situates its conception within the philosophy of well-being and the theory of justice, develops the cognitive and dynamical apparatus of the lifecycle, treats each moment of the cycle through the several frameworks, develops the quantitative assessment of justice and surveys the existing instruments of measurement, traces the cross-cultural variation of flourishing and its practice, displays the apparatus on an extended case, and meets the objections its approach invites.

The paper proceeds as follows. It surveys the frameworks and states its method (§2.2), and situates its conception within the philosophy of well-being and the theory of justice (§2.3). It recapitulates the dynamical-systems vocabulary it will employ (§2.4); establishes the cognitive and computational basis of appraisal, in which evaluation is shown to be a continuous and largely unconscious inference before it is an explicit measurement (§2.5); and specifies the lifecycle as a real cycle whose persistence conditions the relation's survival (§2.6). It sets out, in an analytic matrix, the contribution of each framework at each moment in both its epistemological and its practical layer (§2.7), and then treats the moments of the cycle in turn, cognition (§2.8), practice (§2.9), evaluation (§2.10), reflection (§2.11), and re-cognition (§2.12), each as the site at which several frameworks are drawn upon for the task proper to it. It considers the cycle as a whole, in its three regimes of flourishing, catastrophe, and extinction (§2.13); displays the whole apparatus on an extended longitudinal case (§2.14); traces the cross-cultural variation of flourishing and of the practices of marriage and family (§2.15); states its foundational role in the series and the instruments it bequeaths to the papers that follow (§2.16); meets the objections its approach invites (§2.17); and concludes in plural conclusions (§2.18). A formal appendix gathers the notation and the key concepts (§A) and develops the spectral, decision-theoretic, and dynamical formalisations the main text employs (§B).

2.2. Background and Method

This section surveys the frameworks the paper draws upon, states their relation to one another, and declares the methodological concession under which the paper's assessments are made. The frameworks are surveyed not as competitors among which the paper selects, but as the resources the cycle of a shared life draws upon at the moments suited to each. Five are distinguished, by the epistemology of flourishing each carries.

2.2.1 Five frameworks for the cognition and practice of flourishing

Positivism, in the sense the paper employs, is the position that flourishing is an observable and measurable matter of fact, accessible through its indicators and tractable by quantification. Its developed form in the study of well-being is the tradition of subjective well-being, in which well-being is operationalised as life satisfaction together with the bal-

ance of positive over negative affect, and measured by validated instruments (Diener et al. 1985). The hedonic tradition that underwrites these measures is gathered in Kahneman et al. (1999), and its instruments include scales of positive and negative affect (Watson et al. 1988) and of quality of life (WHOQOL Group 1998). Alongside the subjective measures stand the objective indicators of quality of life, the measurable conditions of a life, and the apparatus of psychometrics by which any such measure is assessed for reliability and validity. The positivist commitment is that what cannot be brought, however indirectly, to measurement cannot be a matter of knowledge in the strict sense.

Evidentialism, as a practical epistemology, is the position that a belief, and the practice founded on it, ought to be proportioned to the evidence, and revised as the evidence revises. In the study of flourishing its developed form is evidence-based practice, in which an intervention is warranted by the weight of controlled evidence that it produces the effect claimed for it. Evidentialism is not identical to positivism, though the two are allied: positivism concerns what flourishing is, an observable fact, while evidentialism concerns how belief about flourishing ought to be formed and updated, by proportioning to evidence. The distinction matters to the paper, because evidentialism, in its deeper form, is the epistemology of belief revision as such, and so reaches below the explicit weighing of studies to the continuous updating of belief that the paper locates at the basis of all appraisal (§2.5).

Normative theory is the position that flourishing is not exhausted by what is the case but involves what ought to be valued: that a good life is constituted by ends there is reason to hold worthy, and not merely by the satisfaction reported or the conditions observed. Its most developed contemporary form, and the one most consonant with this series, is the capabilities approach, in which the measure of a life is the substantive freedom of a person to be and to do what that person has reason to value, the capabilities rather than the achieved functionings alone (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). The approach has a precedent in the recovery of an Aristotelian conception of flourishing as vulnerable to circumstance (Nussbaum 1986). The capabilities approach is consonant with the series because its central notion, the substantive freedom to unfold what one has reason to value, is closely allied to the conception of flourishing as the unfolding of each party's own dynamics that the prior papers developed.

Virtue ethics is the position that flourishing, eudaimonia in its classical sense, is the activity of a life in accordance with excellence of character, and that such excellence is acquired through habituation. In Aristotle the virtues are states of character, formed by the repeated performance of the corresponding actions until they become a settled disposition, a *hexis*; eudaimonia is then the activity of the soul in accordance with these acquired excellences over a complete life (Aristotle 2009). The contemporary recovery of this conception, against the modern reduction of ethics to rules, is owed in large part to MacIntyre (1981), and its extension to the virtues of acknowledged dependence to MacIntyre (1999). The Confucian tradition of self-cultivation supplies a parallel account, in which the person is formed through sustained cultivation, ritual practice, and the ordering of the household and its manners, the good life being an attained and maintained cultivation rather than a state secured once (Tu 1985). The classical sources of this tradition include the *Analects* (Confucius 1979) and the doctrine of the mean (Anonymous 2003). Both traditions locate flourishing in the formation of disposition through habit, and both thereby connect the cognition of flourishing to its practice in a way the other frameworks do not, which is why virtue ethics is the framework proper to the practical moment of the cycle (§2.9).

Phenomenology and hermeneutics together name the position that flourishing is lived and interpreted before it is measured: that it is given, in the first instance, as the felt quality and the understood meaning of a life, and that this givenness is not a defective approximation to a measurable fact but the matter itself, to which any measure is answerable. The phenomenological tradition supplies the account of the lived and intersubjective texture of experience on which the prior papers drew; the account of perception and the lived body is owed to Merleau-Ponty (2012), and the diagnosis of the reduction of the lived world to its measurable indicators to Husserl (1970); the hermeneutic tradition supplies the account of understanding as the interpretation of meaning within a circle that cannot be exited for a view from nowhere. Against the positivist commitment, this framework holds that the reduction of flourishing to its measurable indicators discards precisely what flourishing is, and that the understanding of a shared life is closer to the interpretation of a text than to the reading of an instrument. The structure of such understanding, as a circle that cannot be exited for a view from nowhere, is developed by Gadamer (2004).

2.2.2 The frameworks as symmetry-broken phases

These five frameworks are not five candidate theories of one measurable object, among which evidence will eventually decide. They are five phases, in the sense the prior paper gave the term, of the cognition and practice of flourishing: each is the determinate form the understanding of flourishing assumes under the conditions of a particular discipline and a particular task, and none is the undivided structure of which the others are partial views. The positivist measures what can be measured and is silent on what cannot; the phenomenologist describes what is lived and resists its reduction to measure; the normative theorist specifies what ought to be valued and cannot guarantee its realisation; the virtue theorist describes the formation of disposition and cannot legislate character; the evidentialist proportions belief to evidence and is mute where evidence cannot reach. Each says, in its own broken phase, what no other can say, and each is silent where another speaks.

The relation among them is therefore not one to be resolved by the victory of one framework, nor by their eclectic combination into a single super-framework, which would be the metalanguage the series has argued does not exist. It is the relation of a polyphony to a truth that no single voice possesses, and the burden of the cycle is to draw upon each at the moment to which it is suited, without subordinating the others to it. This is the methodological inheritance of the prior paper, transposed from the disciplines of the theoretical papers to the frameworks of the practical one, and it is a dialectical-materialist rather than a relativist commitment: the frameworks are partial determinations, each from its position, of a flourishing that is real and in production, and not so many incommensurable language games among which there is no fact.

2.2.3 The operational concession

A practice requires what is operable and what is assessable. The cultivation of a shared life proceeds by actions that can be taken and revised, and its revision requires some assessment of whether the cultivation tends toward the good. But the prior papers established that the value at issue in a relation is transversal across the three registers, emergent on their coupled dynamics, and not exhausted by any symbolisation; and they established that to fix such a value in a determinate, possessable structure, to cash it, is

the operation of settling, and the occupation of the place of the barred Other. There is, accordingly, a tension at the centre of any practical and assessing treatment of flourishing: assessment requires that value be structured into an assessable form, and the value that is real resists exactly that structuring.

The paper meets this tension by a concession it states openly and bears throughout. Where it must assess, it restricts itself to value as structured into an assessable proxy, and it holds that this proxy is not the value the prior papers established to be irreducible. The structured proxy is an instrument of practice, warranted by its operational use, and it is not a representation of the real value, which it cannot be. This is the first occasion in the series on which an incomplete value is adopted deliberately rather than diagnosed as a failure, and the adoption is the honest discharge of the prior result rather than its reversal. Since the real value cannot be cashed without occupying the place of the Other, the honest course, where a practice must assess, is not to claim that the assessment reaches the real value, which would be that very occupation, but to concede that what is assessed is a proxy, to use it for what it is operationally worth, and to bear responsibility for its incompleteness. The concession governs every assessment the paper makes, and most consequentially the quantitative assessment of justice in §2.10, whose results are to be read as operationally valid and not as the measurement of a relation's real worth.

The concession also fixes the standing of the explicit, instrumented evaluation that the positivist framework supplies. That evaluation is not thereby disparaged. It is, on the contrary, indispensable to a practice, since a practice without assessment cannot be revised; and the structured proxy it yields is, within its operational limits, a real gain, public, comparable, and accumulable in a way that the unstructured appraisal is not. The concession is not a verdict against measurement but a specification of its standing: the measure is an operationally warranted proxy for a value it does not reach, to be used as such and not mistaken for the value itself. The paper now turns to the vocabulary in which the cycle and its regimes will be described.

2.3. The Philosophy of Well-Being and the Theory of Justice

The paper's conception of a just eudaimonia stands in two philosophical lineages that a foundational treatment must make explicit: the philosophy of well-being, which asks what a good life consists in, and the theory of justice, which asks what is owed among those who share a life. This section locates the conception within each, not to derive it from them, since it was developed on the independent grounds of the prior papers, but to situate it, to mark its agreements and departures, and to make available to the later argument the distinctions these literatures have drawn.

2.3.1 The philosophy of well-being

The philosophy of well-being distinguishes three families of theory of what makes a life go well, a division owed in its canonical form to Parfit (Parfit 1984). Hedonistic theories hold that well-being consists in the balance of pleasure over pain, of positive over negative experience; the good life is the happiest life, and the tradition descends through the classical utilitarians and Sidgwick (Sidgwick 1907). Desire-fulfilment theories hold that well-being consists in the satisfaction of a person's desires, whether or not the satisfaction is experienced as pleasant; the good life is the life in which what one wants is achieved, and the theory has the advantage of grounding a person's good in that person's own valuing rather than in an external standard. Objective-list theories hold that certain things are good for a person whether or not they are desired or found pleasant, that there is a plurality of goods, knowledge, friendship, achievement, virtue, and the like, whose possession makes a life better independently of the person's attitude toward them; the good life is the life furnished with the items on the list.

The conception of this series stands in a determinate relation to these three. It is not hedonistic: the paper has argued at length that the felt satisfaction of a life is a structured proxy that a forged flourishing can satisfy (§2.11.1), and that a relation may produce a high balance of positive affect while being, in its distribution of return, unjust and therefore no eudaimonia. It is not a simple desire-fulfilment theory: the paper has held that the value at issue is not exhausted by what the parties happen to want, since a party may, through habituation to a diminished position, cease to want what the foreclosure of their unfolding has put beyond reach, so that the satisfaction of their now-diminished

desires is compatible with the foreclosure of their flourishing. The conception is closest to an objective-list theory, in that it holds the unfolding of each party's own dynamics, and the justice of the cycle that sustains it, to be good for the parties whether or not they are felt or desired; but it differs from the standard objective-list theory in two respects. It does not offer a list of goods but a structure, the open spiral of a returning cycle, within which the goods of a particular shared life are generated rather than enumerated in advance; and it grounds the objectivity of this structure not in an external standard imposed on the parties but in the dynamics of generation and return that the prior papers derived, so that what is good for the parties is what their own generative activity, justly sustained, produces. The conception is, in the vocabulary of the philosophy of well-being, an objective-list theory whose single item is a structure rather than a content, and whose objectivity is that of a generative process rather than of an imposed standard.

2.3.2 The theory of justice

The condition of justice that the series holds to be constitutive of eudaimonia stands in relation to the principal contemporary theories of justice, and the relation illuminates both what the paper's justice condition is and what it adds. The dominant modern theory of distributive justice, owed to Rawls, concerns the fair distribution of primary goods, the goods any rational person is presumed to want, among them not only income and opportunity but the social bases of self-respect, and it assesses a social arrangement by the principles that would govern this distribution were they chosen from behind a veil of ignorance (Rawls 1971). The paper's justice condition is distributive in form, since it concerns the distribution of returned value among the parties of a relation, and the skew of the return distribution (§2.10.3) is a measure of distributive injustice within the relation; the inclusion, among Rawls's primary goods, of the social bases of self-respect is of particular pertinence, since the party consigned to the low-return tail is deprived not only of returned value but of the self-respect that being returned to sustains.

A second tradition, relational egalitarianism, holds that the concern of justice is not in the first instance the distribution of goods but the character of the relations in which people stand, that justice obtains when people relate as equals rather than when goods are distributed by a pattern, and that the point of equality is the abolition of relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination (Anderson 1999). The paper's justice

condition is, in this respect, relational as much as distributive: the injustice it identifies is the reduction of one party to the sustaining fuel of a relation, a relation of exploitation and subordination within the shared life, and the skew of return is the signature of such a relation and not merely of an unequal distribution. The two construals, the distributive and the relational, are for the paper two aspects of one condition, the distribution of return being the measurable trace of the relational standing of the parties.

A third tradition supplies the connection to recognition. The debate between redistribution and recognition, joined by Fraser and Honneth, concerns whether injustice is fundamentally a matter of maldistribution, to be remedied by redistributing goods, or of misrecognition, the failure to accord a person or group due standing, to be remedied by recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003). The paper's account integrates the two: the return of value to its generator is at once a redistribution, the circulation of value back to the party who produced it, and a recognition, the acknowledgement of that party as a generator whose contribution is owed a return rather than a source from which value may be taken without acknowledgement. The skew of return measures a maldistribution; the foreclosure of unfolding (§2.10.5) measures a misrecognition, the failure to accord a party the standing of one whose own development matters; and the paper holds these to be two faces of a single injustice, as the redistribution-recognition debate, in its more integrative resolutions, has come to hold.

A fourth tradition, the ethics of care, is the one nearest the paper's subject matter and the one whose insight the paper most directly formalises. The care tradition, arising from Gilligan's identification of a moral voice oriented to responsibility and relationship rather than to abstract right (Gilligan 1982), and developed into a political and philosophical ethics by Held and others (Held 2006), holds that the care through which dependents are sustained is morally central and systematically undervalued, and that a just account of social life must reckon the labour of care as labour rather than effacing it as natural or freely given. Kittay's analysis of dependency and the labour it requires is of particular pertinence, since it identifies exactly the sustaining labour whose under-return the paper's skew measure is constructed to detect (Kittay 1999). The paper may be read as supplying, for the central case of the intimate relation, a formalisation of the care tradition's core claim: that the labour of sustaining a shared life is labour, that it generates value, and

that its systematic under-return is an injustice with a measurable signature. The ethics of care supplies the moral insight; the skew of the return distribution offers a structured proxy for its violation.

2.3.3 The location of the paper's conception

The paper's conception of a just eudaimonia is, in sum, an objective-list theory of well-being whose single item is the structure of a justly returning cycle, joined to a theory of justice that is distributive in its measure, relational in its content, integrative of redistribution and recognition, and formalising of the ethics of care. The conception was not assembled from these positions but developed on independent grounds, and its relation to them is one of convergence rather than derivation: the prior papers' account of generative justice, the return to the creator, and the unfolding of each arrived, by its own route, at a conception that the philosophy of well-being and the theory of justice illuminate from their several directions. The convergence is itself an argument of a kind, since a conception reached independently and found to gather the insights of several established traditions has a claim to have articulated something the traditions severally approach; but the paper rests its conception on the prior derivation and offers the convergence as corroboration and not as ground.

2.4. A Recapitulation of the Dynamical Vocabulary

The paper describes the lifecycle of a shared flourishing in the vocabulary of dynamical systems, and the central terms are recalled here in a form sufficient for the use made of them. The recapitulation is brief and non-technical, and it carries forward the qualification, Standard treatments of the notions recalled here are Strogatz (1994) and Hirsch et al. (2013). established at length in the prior paper, that the relation is modelled by a dynamical system only as a structural analogy, and that the analogy is subject to the limit there identified, that the law governing a relation is itself reconfigured by what the relation generates, so that no fixed system captures it in full. The vocabulary is employed for what it makes visible, and not as a claim that a relation is a system of the standard kind.

2.4.1 States, evolution, and trajectories

A dynamical system is specified by a space of states, the configurations the system may occupy, together with a rule of evolution that carries each state to its successor in time. The history of the system is a trajectory through the state space, the path traced as the state evolves under the rule. For a relation, the state space is the space of configurations a shared life may occupy, and the trajectory is the relation's history; the rule of evolution is the relation's own dynamics, which, as the prior paper insisted, is not fixed but is reconfigured by the relation's products, a qualification held in reserve throughout what follows.

2.4.2 Fixed points, stability, and decay

A fixed point is a state that the rule of evolution carries to itself, a configuration at which the system, once arrived, remains. A fixed point is stable if trajectories that begin nearby are drawn toward it, and unstable if they are driven away. A trajectory that loses the energy or the input sustaining its movement winds down toward a fixed point and there comes to rest. For a relation, the pertinent fixed point is the state in which the relation's movement has ceased, in which value is no longer generated, exchanged, or returned, and the parties no longer revise their sense of one another. This terminal rest is not a benign equilibrium but the cessation of the relation as a living process, and the paper names it extinction (§2.13). A relation that is not sustained decays toward it.

2.4.3 Attractors and limit cycles

An attractor is a set of states toward which trajectories from a region of the state space are drawn, and on which they thereafter remain. A fixed point is the simplest attractor. A limit cycle is an attractor of a different kind: a closed trajectory, a loop in the state space, toward which neighbouring trajectories are drawn and along which the system then circulates indefinitely. A limit cycle is a self-sustaining oscillation, a movement that maintains itself by returning, again and again, through a cycle of states rather than coming to rest at a point. The relevance to the present paper is direct: a living relation is modelled not by a fixed point, which would be its cessation, but by a sustained cyclic movement, the lifecycle of cognition, practice, evaluation, reflection, and renewed

cognition, which maintains the relation by its continued turning. The persistence of this cyclic movement, rather than the attainment of any resting state, is the mark of a living relation.

2.4.4 The phase accumulated around a cycle

A system that returns, around a cycle, to its starting configuration in the state space need not return unchanged in every respect. A quantity carried along the cycle may, on return to the starting configuration, fail to coincide with its initial value, and the discrepancy, the phase accumulated around the loop, is the holonomy on which the prior papers turned. A cycle of vanishing holonomy returns everything to where it began, a pure repetition that goes round without rising. A cycle of positive holonomy returns to the starting configuration with a gain, a spiral that ascends as it returns. A cycle of negative holonomy returns with a loss, a winding that depletes as it turns. The distinction between the good and the bad cycle, developed throughout the series, is the sign of this accumulated phase, and it is carried over here to the lifecycle of a shared flourishing: the same five moments may be traversed in a manner that ascends, in a manner that merely repeats, or in a manner that depletes, and the difference is the holonomy of the turn, not the identity of the moments traversed.

2.4.5 Bifurcation

The qualitative behaviour of a dynamical system may depend on parameters, the slowly varying conditions under which the system evolves. As a parameter is varied, the system's behaviour may change smoothly through a range and then, at a critical value, change in kind: a stable fixed point may lose its stability, a limit cycle may appear or vanish, an attractor may divide. Such a qualitative change at a critical parameter value is a bifurcation. The relevance is that the regime of a relation, whether it sustains a flourishing spiral, settles into a depleting cycle, or decays toward extinction, may not change gradually with its conditions but may shift in kind at a threshold, a small further change in the sustaining conditions carrying the relation across a critical value into a qualitatively different regime. The language of bifurcation is the language in which the paper describes the passage of a relation from one regime to another (§2.13), and it captures a feature the gradual language of more or less well-being does not, that the difference between a

sustained and a collapsing relation can be a difference in kind reached by a small change in degree.

2.5. The Cognitive and Computational Basis of Appraisal

Before evaluation is an explicit measurement, it is a continuous and largely unconscious inference. The parties to a shared life do not, for the most part, assess their relation by deliberate procedure; they are appraising it constantly, beneath reflection, registering in the texture of an ordinary day whether things are well or ill between them, whether the relation is tending toward warmth or toward distance, whether the shared life is rising or declining. This section establishes that appraisal is, at its basis, an inference upon a partially observable state, conducted in a value that is not symbolised; that the explicit, instrumented evaluation of §2.10 is a structured proxy laid over this basal inference; and that the framework which best renders the basal process is the framework of belief updating, which is evidentialism reaching below the deliberate weighing of studies to the continuous revision of a belief about an unobservable state.

2.5.1 Appraisal as a biological process

The appraisal of a situation is, in the first instance, a biological event and not a deliberation. The tradition of appraisal theory in the psychology of emotion holds that emotion arises from an evaluation of a situation with respect to a being's concerns, and that this evaluation runs through rapid, multilevel, largely automatic checks before any of it becomes available to reflection (Lazarus 1991; Scherer 2001). That emotion and cognition are not separable faculties but aspects of one evaluative process is argued by Pessoa (2008), and the constructed and inferential character of emotional appraisal by Barrett (2017). The felt quality of a moment in a shared life, the ease or the disquiet that arrives unbidden after an exchange, is the registration of such an appraisal, an evaluation already accomplished beneath awareness and delivered to consciousness as a feeling. The neuroscience of this process locates it in the rapid integration, by prefrontal and associated circuits, of present perception with prior expectation, and the issuing of an evaluation of the current state on which decision is then based. Crucially, the process operates on quantities the subject does not and cannot fully articulate: the appraisal proceeds in a

value that is felt and acted upon before, and often without ever, being symbolised. The basal appraisal is conducted in exactly the unsymbolised value the prior papers held to be the real one.

A component of this process deserves emphasis, because it grounds the connection to the matter of the field. Interoception, the sensing of the body's internal condition, is increasingly understood as itself a process of inference, in which the felt bodily state is the brain's best estimate of the causes of its internal signals, and emotion a reading of this estimate in context (Seth 2013). The felt sense of how a relation stands, the bodily ease or unease that is the first and most constant appraisal of a shared life, is on this account an interoceptive inference, and its data are in large part the sensory and habitual fabric the prior paper identified as the matter of the field: the meals, the rooms, the rhythms, the contact, registered in the body before they are formulated in thought. The appraisal of a relation is, at its basis, the body's continuous inference upon the texture of the shared life.

2.5.2 Appraisal as inference upon a partially observable state

The formal structure of this basal appraisal is rendered by the framework of decision under partial observability. An agent that cannot observe the true state of its world directly, but only through partial and noisy observations, must maintain a belief, a probability distribution over the possible states, and update this belief as observations arrive; it then chooses its actions on the belief rather than on the unobtainable true state. This is the structure formalised as the partially observable Markov decision process, in which a hidden state evolves, the agent receives observations that depend on it, the agent maintains and updates a belief over the hidden state, and the agent selects actions to secure value over time (Kaelbling et al. 1998). The general framework of learning to act for value under uncertainty is set out in Sutton and Barto (2018).

The structure maps onto the appraisal of a relation with a precision that is instructive, and the mapping carries the commitments of the prior papers into the vocabulary of decision.

The appraisal of a relation as inference upon a hidden state. The basal appraisal of a relation has the structure of inference upon a partially observable state. The true state of the relation is hidden, not observable directly, in keeping with the prior result that the real value of a relation is transversal across the registers and not exhausted by any observation. What is observed is the everyday sensory and habitual fabric of the shared life, the matter of the field, which depends on the hidden state without revealing it fully. Each party maintains a belief, not a determinate verdict but a distribution, over the state of the relation, in keeping with the prior account of relational value as superposed rather than definite. The belief is updated as the fabric is lived, and action, which is practice, is taken upon the belief. The appraisal is thus an inference, conducted in an unsymbolised value, upon a state that no observation discloses in full.

The mapping has a consequence that connects this section to the formal dilemma of the prior paper. A standard process of this kind operates with a fixed value function, a fixed specification of what the agent is to secure. The appraisal of a relation does not. What the parties are to secure, the good of the relation, is itself reconceived across the lifecycle, at the moment of re-cognition (§2.12); the value function is rewritten by the process it governs. This is the reflexive reconfiguration of the prior papers, and it reappears here as the non-standard feature that the value function of the relational decision process is not fixed but is revised by the cycle, which is the decision-theoretic form of the thesis that there is no fixed meta-value-grammar.

2.5.3 Self-maintenance and the imperative to keep inferring

A development of the inferential account binds appraisal to the survival of the relation. On the free-energy account of the functioning of adaptive systems, an organism maintains itself, holds itself away from the disordered states that would dissolve it, precisely by continually minimising the discrepancy between its expectations and its sensory states, which is to say by continually inferring and acting to make its inferences good (Friston 2010). The process-theoretic development of this principle, in which perception and action jointly minimise expected surprise, is given by Friston et al. (2017). Perception, action,

and the maintenance of the organism's own existence are, on this account, one process: to cease to infer and to act upon the inference is to cease to maintain the boundary that constitutes the system, and so to dissolve.

Transposed to the relation, this account supplies the deep form of a thesis the paper will develop in dynamical terms (§2.13). The continual appraisal of a relation, the unbroken updating of each party's belief about its state and the action taken upon it, is not an optional accompaniment to the relation but the activity by which the relation maintains itself. A relation in which the parties cease to appraise, cease to update their sense of one another, cease to act upon that sense, is a relation that has ceased to perform the activity by which it holds itself in being, and it dissolves toward the terminal rest of §2.4.2. The imperative to keep inferring, on this account, is the imperative to keep the relation in existence; the cessation of appraisal is the beginning of extinction.

2.5.4 The two registers of evaluation

The foregoing establishes a distinction that governs the paper's treatment of evaluation. There are two registers in which a relation is evaluated. The first is the basal, continuous, largely unconscious inference described in this section: an appraisal conducted in unsymbolised value, upon a hidden state, through the lived fabric of the shared life, and running through every moment of the cycle without occupying any one of them. This is evaluation in its primary and pervasive form, and it is conducted in the real value the prior papers defended. The second is the explicit, instrumented, structured evaluation that the positivist framework supplies and that §2.10 develops: a deliberate measurement, conducted at particular moments, in which some aspect of the relation is brought to a structured and assessable form.

The relation between the two registers is the relation the operational concession named (§2.2.3). The explicit evaluation is a structured proxy laid over the basal inference: it takes the unsymbolised belief that the parties continuously maintain and renders some structured aspect of it in a form that can be measured, compared, and accumulated. The proxy is operationally valuable, since the basal inference, precisely because it is unsymbolised, is private, incommunicable, and unaccountable, while the structured measure is public and checkable. And the proxy is incomplete, since the structuring discards ex-

actly the unsymbolised remainder in which the real appraisal is conducted. To evaluate a relation explicitly is to symbolise, for operational use, a belief that is in its nature unsymbolised, and the gain in publicity is paid for in a loss of the real. The paper's treatment of explicit evaluation in §2.10 proceeds under this understanding throughout: the measures it discusses are structured proxies for a basal appraisal they do not reach, and evidentialism, which is the epistemology of the basal belief updating itself, is the framework within which both the basal inference and its structured proxy are to be understood.

2.6. The Lifecycle as a Real Cycle

This section specifies the object the paper takes as primary. The lifecycle of a shared flourishing is a cycle, in the dynamical sense recalled in §2.4: a sustained cyclic movement that maintains the relation by its continued turning, rather than a linear sequence of stages completed once and for all. The section establishes three things about this cycle: that it is not linear but a movement whose moments interpenetrate and feed back; that its persistence is the condition of the relation's existence, so that the cessation of the cycle is the relation's extinction; and that it turns, across the time of a relation, through nested repetitions from a beginning, through a marriage, into the later years.

2.6.1 The moments of the cycle, and their non-linearity

The cycle is articulated into five moments: cognition, the apprehension of what the flourishing of this shared life consists in; practice, the cultivation and the action through which it is pursued; evaluation, the assessment of how the relation stands; reflection, the re-examination of that assessment and of the cognition that framed it; and re-cognition, the revised apprehension with which a further turn of the cycle begins. These are moments and not stages. A stage is completed and left behind; a moment is a recurring aspect of a movement that is always, in some measure, engaged in all of them at once. The parties do not first complete their cognition of the good, then practise, then evaluate, then reflect, then begin again. They practise on a cognition that is still forming; they evaluate continuously, as §2.5 established, while they practise; their reflection revises their practice mid-course; and their cognition is reconceived without waiting for a turn of the cycle to be complete. The moments interpenetrate and feed back upon one another, and

the articulation into five is an analytic device for treating, in turn, aspects of a movement that does not in fact proceed in turn.

One moment in particular refuses localisation. Evaluation, as the basal and continuous appraisal of §2.5, is not one station of the cycle but an undercurrent running through all of them: the parties are appraising the state of the relation while they cognise its good, while they practise, while they reflect, and while they reconceive. The treatment of evaluation as a distinct moment (§2.10) concerns its explicit and instrumented form, the deliberate measurement undertaken at particular junctures; the basal evaluation, the unbroken belief updating, pervades the whole. The cycle is, in this respect, a movement with a continuous monitoring of its own state, in the manner of a system that maintains itself by never ceasing to estimate where it stands.

2.6.2 The persistence of the cycle as the condition of the relation

The central claim of the section concerns what the turning of the cycle is for. It is not that the cycle is a useful description of a relation that would exist in any case. The turning of the cycle is the activity by which the relation exists, and its cessation is the relation's end.

The persistence of the cycle is the condition of the relation's existence. A relation is a living process maintained by the continued turning of its cycle, and not a state that, once attained, persists of itself. The continued generation of value, its circulation and return, the unbroken appraisal of the relation's state, and the practice taken upon that appraisal, are the activity by which the relation holds itself in being, in the manner of a self-maintaining system that exists only so long as it continues to infer and to act (§2.5.3). A relation in which this activity ceases does not persist in a quiescent but intact condition; it decays toward the terminal rest in which value is no longer generated or returned and the parties no longer revise their sense of one another. The cessation of the cycle is therefore not a relation at rest but a relation extinguished. To be in a living relation is to be engaged in the continued turning of its cycle; to cease the turning is to let the relation lapse.

This claim distinguishes the present account from any treatment of relational well-being as a state to be reached and thereafter possessed. There is no state of a achieved flourishing that, once secured, maintains itself without the continued activity of the cycle, just as there is no fixed point of a living relation that is not its cessation (§2.4.2). The good of a shared life is not banked; it is generated, again and again, in the turning, and a relation that ceases to generate it does not hold what it had but loses it. The implication for practice is developed throughout the paper: the work of a shared life is not the attainment of a condition but the sustaining of a movement, and the most consequential failure is not the failure to reach a state but the cessation of the turning.

2.6.3 The cycle across the time of a relation

The cycle turns, and a relation is many turns of it, nested and accumulating. A single exchange may be a small turn, cognised, practised, appraised, reflected upon, and reconceived within an afternoon. A season of a relation is a larger turn, and the passage from courtship to a settled life, from a settled life through its trials, into the later years, is the largest turn the paper considers. These turns are nested: the small turns compose the seasons, and the seasons compose the arc of a shared life. The marriage at which a relation may arrive is not the end of the cycle but a transformation of its conditions, after which the same moments recur under altered circumstances, the cognition of the good revised by years of shared practice, the practice settled into the habits and household of §2.9, the evaluation informed by a long history, the reflection deepened, and the re-cognition carrying forward what the prior turns have accumulated.

This accumulation across turns is the lifecycle's holonomy (§2.4.4). The re-cognition with which a turn ends is not identical to the cognition with which it began; the difference, accumulated over a turn, is the phase the turn has acquired, and accumulated over many turns, it is the long ascent or the long decline of a shared life. A relation whose turns accumulate a positive phase rises across its history, its cognition of the good deepening, its practice enriching, its parties developing through their shared life into more than they were. A relation whose turns accumulate a negative phase declines across its history, however intact its form, depleting its parties turn by turn. And a relation whose cycle

ceases to turn neither rises nor declines but ends. These three possibilities, the rising spiral, the declining cycle, and the cessation, are the three regimes the paper treats as a whole in §2.13, after it has traversed the moments of a single turn. The paper now enters the cycle at its first moment, the cognition of what the flourishing of a shared life consists in.

2.7. The Frameworks across the Moments: An Analytic Matrix

The frameworks of §2.2.1 are drawn upon at the moments of the cycle to which each is suited, and the paper's treatment of the moments (§2.8 through §2.12) develops this drawing-upon in prose. Because the relation of five frameworks to five moments is not easily held in view across the sections that develop it, this section sets it out in a matrix, which serves as a map of the treatment to follow and as a statement, in compact form, of the foundational claim that each framework contributes a distinct epistemology and a distinct practice at each moment. The matrix distinguishes two layers, since each framework, at each moment, both cognises the moment's object in a characteristic way, its epistemological layer, and guides the moment's action in a characteristic way, its practical layer. The two layers are presented in two tables, the first for the epistemology and the second for the practice.

The matrix is to be read as an analytic device and not as a partition. The moments interpenetrate (§2.6.1), and the frameworks are not assigned exclusively to moments but are each available at each moment, more central at some and more peripheral at others; the entries record the characteristic contribution of each framework at each moment, the contribution the prose develops where it is most consequential. A cell records how a given framework, at a given moment, takes up that moment's task, and the reader tracing a single framework down a column will find its distinctive standpoint maintained across the moments, while the reader tracing a single moment across a row will find the polyphony of frameworks that the moment draws upon.

The two tables together state, in compact form, the foundational structure the paper develops: that the cognition and the practice of a shared flourishing are conducted at five moments, that each moment draws upon five frameworks, and that each framework

Table 2.1: The epistemological layer: how each framework cognises the object of each moment of the cycle.

Framework	Cognition	Practice	Evaluation	Reflection	Re-cognition
Positivist	Flourishing as a measurable matter of fact	Practices as interventions with measurable effects	Measurement by validated instruments	Measures read against their limits	Revision of measured baselines
Evidentialist	Belief about the good proportioned to evidence	Supported practices, warranted by controlled evidence	Belief updating on the evidence of the lived fabric	Re-proportioning of belief as evidence revises	Carrying forward the updated belief
Normative	Flourishing as the substantive freedom of each to unfold	Practice as the realisation of capability	Assessment against the specification of just flourishing	Whether the specification was met, and at whose cost	Re-specification of the good in light of the turn
Virtue-theoretic	Flourishing as activity in accordance with cultivated excellence	Habituation; formation of <i>hexis</i> and family manner	The state of the dispositions formed	Whether the dispositions are excellences or their contraries	Disposition carried forward, deepened or narrowed
Phenomenological	Flourishing as lived and interpreted before measured	Cultivation of attention to the shared life	Thick description; the felt and meant quality	The lived meaning the measures discarded	The reopened, unsymbolised apprehension

contributes, at each moment, both a way of cognising the moment's object and a way of guiding its action. The prose of the sections that follow develops the cells of this matrix where each is most consequential, the normative and the virtue-theoretic at the moment of cognition (§2.8), the virtue-theoretic and the evidential at the moment of practice (§2.9), the positivist most fully at the moment of evaluation (§2.10), and the reassertion of the unsymbolised and the just at the moments of reflection and re-cognition (§2.11, §2.12). The matrix does not replace that development, since the prose alone can state the tensions among the frameworks and the qualifications each entry requires; it provides the map within which the development is to be read, and the assurance that the treatment of the moments, though it foregrounds the framework most consequential at each, rests on the full matrix of frameworks and moments that this section sets out.

Table 2.2: The practical layer: how each framework guides the action of each moment of the cycle.

Framework	Cognition	Practice	Evaluation	Reflection	Re-cognition
Positivist	Specify measurable targets for the shared life	Adopt practices with established effects	Administer the instruments; compute the proxies	Do not possess the measure as the truth	Reset targets to the new baseline
Evidentialist	Form belief about the good in proportion to evidence	Employ supported practices within their limits	Update belief on the lived evidence	Revise belief; resist over-confidence in the measure	Begin the turn on the revised belief
Normative	Specify what this shared life ought to value	Make room for each party's capability to unfold	Test return and unfolding against the specification	Reassert the question of justice	Re-specify the good for the next turn
Virtue-theoretic	Discern the excellences this shared life requires	Cultivate, do not legislate, the dispositions (§2.9.2)	Read the dispositions formed	Guard against the hardening of habit into rule	Carry the cultivated disposition into the turn
Phenomenological	Attend to the lived sense of the good for these two	Cultivate the quality of attention	Describe thickly; refuse the metric's last word	Return the question to the unsymbolised register	Reopen the apprehension for the next turn

2.8. Cognition: What the Flourishing of a Shared Life Consists In

The cycle is entered at the moment of cognition, the apprehension of what the flourishing of this shared life consists in. The task of this moment is not the measurement of a flourishing already defined, which belongs to evaluation, but the prior apprehension of what is to count as flourishing for these two, in this life: the framing within which all subsequent practice and assessment proceed. Three frameworks are drawn upon at this moment, the normative, the virtue-theoretic, and the phenomenological, and each contributes a distinct component to the cognition; the moment closes by stating the normative specification of a just flourishing on which the paper's later evaluation will rest.

2.8.1 The normative component: flourishing as the unfolding of each

The normative framework supplies the cognition that flourishing is not the satisfaction reported nor the conditions possessed but the substantive freedom of each party to unfold what that party has reason to value. The capabilities approach is the developed form of this cognition: the measure of a life is the range of beings and doings genuinely open to a person, the capabilities, and not merely the functionings achieved or the resources held (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011). Transposed to the shared life, the cognition is that the flourishing of the relation is the substantive freedom of each party to unfold that party's own dynamics, the development of each into what each has it in them to become, sustained rather than foreclosed by the shared life.

This cognition fixes two things the other components and the later evaluation depend on. It fixes that flourishing is plural and not aggregate: it is the unfolding of each, and not a single quantity of relational satisfaction to which both contribute and in which their distinct developments are merged. A shared life has not flourished if it has produced a large sum of satisfaction unevenly distributed, with one party developed and the other foreclosed; the unfolding is of each, severally, or it is not the flourishing the cognition specifies. And it fixes that flourishing is a freedom and not a state: it is the openness of each party's development, the capability of unfolding, and not a particular condition attained, which preserves at the level of cognition the thesis that flourishing is not a state to be banked but a movement to be sustained.

The distinction the capabilities approach draws between a capability and a functioning bears directly on the cognition of a shared flourishing, and it is worth drawing out. A functioning is a being or doing achieved; a capability is the substantive freedom to achieve it, whether or not it is in fact achieved. The distinction matters because a shared life may produce achieved functionings, a party who is fed, housed, and occupied, while foreclosing the capability of which they are the husk, the party's substantive freedom to have done and become otherwise. A relation in which one party's functionings are provided for, but in which that party has no real freedom to pursue the developments they have reason to value, has supplied the functioning and foreclosed the capability, and it has not, on this cognition, sustained that party's flourishing. The point guards against a characteristic misreading of a shared life, in which the provision of a comfortable condition is taken for

the flourishing of the one provided for; the cognition the normative framework supplies is that flourishing is the freedom to unfold, and that a comfort which forecloses the freedom is the mark of a foreclosure and not of a flourishing. The cognition also fixes what the later evaluation must therefore attempt, the assessment not merely of what each party has and does but of what each party is genuinely free to become within the shared life, which is the most demanding of the things the evaluation is asked to proxy and the one its proxies reach least adequately (§2.10.5).

2.8.2 The virtue-theoretic component: flourishing as activity in accordance with cultivated excellence

The virtue-theoretic framework supplies a cognition the normative framework leaves implicit: that the unfolding of a party's dynamics is not a spontaneous expansion but an activity in accordance with excellences that are cultivated, and that the shared life is among the principal sites of their cultivation. In the Aristotelian account, *eudaimonia* is the activity of a life in accordance with excellence of character, and such excellence is acquired by habituation, the repeated performance of the corresponding actions until they settle into a disposition (Aristotle 2009). In the Confucian account, the person is formed through sustained self-cultivation, much of it conducted in the ordering of the household and the practice of its daily observances (Tu 1985). The conception of the person as constituted in relation, and of autonomy as itself developed rather than presupposed, is consonant with the self-determination tradition in psychology (Ryan and Deci 2000). The cognition these traditions supply is that the flourishing of a shared life is not only the freedom of each to unfold but the activity of each, in accordance with excellences that the shared life cultivates, so that the relation is not merely the condition under which each develops but a principal medium of the development.

This component connects the cognition of flourishing to its practice, and so prepares the moment of practice (§2.9). Because the excellences in accordance with which a life flourishes are cultivated by habituation, the cognition of what flourishing consists in already points toward the formation of habit and the ordering of a common life as the means of its pursuit. The virtue-theoretic cognition is, in this respect, the cognition that flourishing must be practised into being, and it forbids in advance any conception of the good life as a condition that could be secured otherwise than through the cultivation of

disposition over time.

The virtue-theoretic component supplies, further, a cognition that the normative framework taken alone might miss: that in a shared life the excellences are cultivated jointly, and that some of them are excellences of the relation and not only of the parties severally. The patience, the attentiveness, the generosity, and the justice that a good shared life requires are dispositions formed in the parties by the practice of the shared life itself, each party habituated by the relation into the character the relation needs and, in being so habituated, developed; and there are, besides, excellences that belong to the pair, a way of attending to one another, a manner of repair after conflict, a shared bearing toward the world, which are dispositions of the relation, cultivated by its practice and possessed by neither party alone. The classical treatment of such friendship, as a relation in which each wills the good of the other for the other's sake and in which the friends are a condition of one another's flourishing, is Aristotle's (Aristotle 2002). The cognition that flourishing is activity in accordance with cultivated excellence thus carries, for a shared life, the recognition that the relation is a principal medium of the parties' development and the bearer of excellences of its own, and that to cognise the flourishing of a shared life is to cognise the excellences, of each party and of the pair, that the life is to cultivate. This recognition is what the moment of practice will take up, under the constraint that the cultivation of these excellences must guide and not legislate the relation's habit-forming dynamics (§2.9).

2.8.3 The phenomenological component: flourishing as lived and meant

The phenomenological framework supplies the cognition that flourishing is, before it is anything assessable, lived and understood: given as the felt quality and the apprehended meaning of a shared life, and not in the first instance as a fact about it. This component is a corrective to the other two as much as an addition. It holds that the normative specification of capabilities and the virtue-theoretic account of cultivated excellence, however just, remain abstract until they are referred to the lived texture of a particular shared life, in which alone the flourishing of these two has its concrete sense. The cognition of what flourishing consists in, for a given couple, is finally an interpretation of their shared life from within it, a hermeneutic apprehension of what their flourishing means, and not the application to them of a general specification from without.

The phenomenological component also supplies the cognition that what is apprehended at this moment is in large part unsymbolised. The felt sense of what a good shared life would be, for these two, precedes and exceeds its articulation; the cognition of flourishing is, at its root, the basal apprehension of §2.5, conducted in a value not yet brought to words. This connects the moment of cognition to the account of appraisal and guards the moment against the supposition that to cognise flourishing is to formulate a definition of it. To cognise flourishing, at this moment, is in the first place to apprehend, in the lived and largely unsymbolised register, what the good of this shared life would be, and only secondarily to articulate it.

2.8.4 The frameworks in concert and in tension

The three components are drawn upon together, and they do not perfectly agree. The normative framework specifies flourishing as the unfolding of each, abstractly and for any couple; the virtue-theoretic framework locates it in the cultivation of excellence through shared habit; the phenomenological framework refers it to the lived and unsymbolised meaning of a particular life and resists its abstract specification. The tension is productive and is not to be resolved by the dominance of one component. The normative specification without the phenomenological reference is empty, a general account not yet referred to any actual life; the phenomenological apprehension without the normative specification is mute, a felt sense not yet articulated into anything that could guide practice or be assessed; and both without the virtue-theoretic component float free of the habituation through which alone a flourishing is brought into being. The cognition of flourishing is adequate when the three are held together, the normative specifying what is to be valued, the phenomenological referring it to the lived meaning of this life, and the virtue-theoretic binding it to the cultivation through which it is pursued.

2.8.5 The normative specification of a just flourishing

The moment of cognition closes by stating, for use in the paper's later evaluation, the specification of a just flourishing toward which the cognition tends. The specification gathers the cognition of this moment with the results of the prior paper.

The normative specification of a just flourishing. A shared life flourishes justly when its cycle of value satisfies the following, jointly. The value generated in the shared life circulates and returns to those who generate it, no party being reduced to a source of value from which it is extracted without return. The unfolding of each party's own dynamics is sustained, neither party's development being foreclosed for the sake of the other's or of the relation's. And the cycle is sustained as a living and open movement, its value neither settled into a possessed condition nor cashed into a closed account, but generated anew in the turning. The first is the condition of justice, carried from the prior paper's account of generative justice and the return to the creator. The second is the eudaimonic condition, the unfolding of each. The third is the condition of the cycle's life, its sustenance as an open spiral rather than a closed repetition. A flourishing that meets the eudaimonic condition while failing the just is not a diminished flourishing but, as the prior paper established, no eudaimonia at all, the development of one purchased by the foreclosure of another. The three conditions are therefore not a list of desiderata to be traded against one another but the joint specification of a single thing, a just eudaimonia, and they furnish the normative basis against which the paper's later evaluation is conducted.

This specification is the product of the moment of cognition, and it is the standard the moment of evaluation will require. It is stated normatively, as what ought to be valued, and not yet as anything measured; the passage from this normative specification to an operational assessment, with all the concession that passage requires, is the work of §2.10. The cycle now turns to the moment at which a flourishing so specified is pursued: the moment of practice.

2.9. Practice: The Cultivation of Habit and Household

The cycle turns to practice, the cultivation and the action through which a flourishing, cognised in its normative specification, is pursued. The task of this moment is the formation of the shared life such that the just eudaimonia of §2.8.5 is generated, and the governing constraint, carried from the prior paper, is that this formation is a cultivation and not a construction: the shared grammar of a relation cannot be legislated from a

position of possession, but only tended into an openness within which it continues to be jointly reconfigured. Three frameworks are drawn upon at this moment, the virtue-theoretic, the evidential, and the phenomenological, and the moment is organised around the tension between cultivating a disposition and not legislating it.

2.9.1 The virtue-theoretic component: flourishing as habituation

The virtue-theoretic framework is the framework proper to the moment of practice, because it alone holds that flourishing is brought into being through the formation of disposition by habit. In the Aristotelian account, the excellences in accordance with which a life flourishes are acquired by habituation: one becomes just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, until the disposition is settled into a *hexis*, a stable state of character from which the corresponding action flows without struggle (Aristotle 2009). The practice of a shared flourishing is, on this account, the habituation of the two parties, severally and together, into the dispositions in accordance with which their shared life is good: the formation, by repeated practice, of the settled ways of attending, responding, and caring that constitute a good shared life.

The matter of this habituation is the everyday sensory and habitual fabric the prior paper identified as the matter of the field. A habit of a shared life is formed in the recurrence of concrete practices: a way of taking a meal together, a manner of greeting and parting, an ordering of the common rooms, a rhythm of attention to one another. These recurrences are the *habitus* in the sociological sense, the durable dispositions, inculcated by a form of life, that generate the practices of that form of life and reproduce it (Bourdieu 1990); and they are the family manner, the customs and bearing transmitted across a shared life and, in time, across generations. The cultivation of a shared flourishing is conducted in this fabric: not in the formulation of principles for the relation, but in the formation, by recurrence, of the dispositions borne in the concrete texture of the days.

The mechanism by which a disposition forms from a recurrence is worth making explicit, because it governs what the cultivation of a shared life can and cannot do. A practice repeated becomes easier, then expected, then a part of how the shared life is, until at last it is performed without deliberation and felt as natural, the disposition having settled into the *hexis* from which it flows unbidden. This is why the matter of a shared

flourishing is the small and recurrent rather than the large and singular: it is not the grand resolution but the repeated practice that forms a disposition, not the declaration of how the two will live but the daily living of it that settles into the family manner they come to have. A couple does not become attentive to one another by resolving to be attentive; they become attentive by attending, in the concrete recurrences of their days, until attention is the disposition from which they act. The cultivation of a shared flourishing works, accordingly, on the recurrences: it tends the daily fabric such that the practices worth settling into dispositions are the ones that in fact recur, and it does so knowing that what recurs will become, in time, what the parties are. This is also why the corruption of a shared life is so often gradual and unremarked, a small unkindness or a small neglect, recurring, settling by the same mechanism into a disposition, until the relation has acquired a character no one resolved upon and each performs without deliberation. The formation of disposition by habituation is neutral as to the disposition formed, and the cultivation of a shared flourishing is the tending of the recurrences such that the dispositions formed are the excellences of §2.8.2 and not their contraries.

2.9.2 The constraint: cultivation without legislation

The formation of a shared disposition stands under a constraint that distinguishes cultivation from its corruption. The prior paper established that to possess and modify the generative structure of a relation from a position claimed to be external to it is exploitation in the symbolic register, the appropriation of a jointly generated generativity to a single legislator, who thereby reduces the other from a co-author of the shared life to an object governed by it. Applied to the formation of habit, this yields the constraint that the cultivation of a shared disposition must guide the relation's own dynamics without legislating its productions: it must tend the conditions under which good habits form and reform themselves jointly, and it must not impose a fixed habit as a rule the other is required to obey.

Cultivation guides the formation of habit; legislation possesses it. The cultivation of a shared habit is the tending of the conditions under which a disposition forms and

continues to reform itself in the joint practice of both parties; it guides the relation's own habit-forming dynamics without fixing their product. The legislation of a habit is the imposition, by one party from a position claimed to be external, of a fixed disposition as a rule the other is required to keep; it possesses the relation's habit-forming dynamics and fixes their product. The two are distinguished as the cultivation of a field is distinguished from the construction of a grammar, and as guidance is distinguished from possession in the prior paper's account of symbolic justice. A habit that is cultivated remains jointly authored and open to joint reform, and the disposition it forms is the disposition of both; a habit that is legislated is the disposition the legislator has fixed, and its imposition reduces the other to its object. The formation of a shared disposition is just when it cultivates and unjust when it legislates, and the difference is not in the content of the habit but in whether the habit-forming dynamics is guided or possessed.

This is the central tension of the moment of practice, and it admits of no general procedure for its resolution, since a procedure for forming the right habits, applied from outside the joint practice, would itself be a legislation. The tension is managed, in the manner of the prior paper's practice, subtractively: by the cultivation of the conditions under which good habits arise rather than the imposition of the habits themselves, by the preservation of the other party's capacity to reform a shared habit rather than the fixing of it, and by the recurrent question whether a habit of the shared life is still jointly authored or has hardened into a rule one party keeps and the other imposes. A family manner is well cultivated when it remains the joint and revisable bearing of both, and ill cultivated when it sets into a regime one administers and the other obeys.

2.9.3 An operational vocabulary for cultivation without legislation

The constraint is stated as a principle, and a foundational treatment owes the subsequent papers an operational vocabulary in which the principle can be applied, since a principle that cannot be brought to bear on the recurring practice of a shared life is of little use to a praxis. This subsection supplies such a vocabulary, under the operational concession: the terms it introduces are operational instruments for the conduct of a practice, and not

measurements of the unsymbolised value the practice serves.

The first instrument is a set of signals by which the drift from cultivation toward legislation may be recognised before it has hardened. The drift is gradual, by the mechanism of habituation (§2.9.1), and it is therefore most often unremarked; the signals are the marks by which it may be caught. A shared habit is drifting toward legislation when its revision by one party comes to be treated by the other as a transgression rather than as a contribution; when the justification offered for a practice ceases to be a reason the other could weigh and becomes an appeal to how things are done; when one party's deviation from a practice is met with correction rather than with inquiry; when the practices of the shared life are increasingly described by one party in the language of rule, expectation, and obligation rather than in the language of joint preference; and when the question whether a practice still suits both parties is met with the answer that it is the practice, as though its being established were a reason for its continuance. These signals are operational and defeasible, and no one of them is decisive; their accumulation is the operational sign that a habit is hardening from a joint bearing into an administered rule, and that the cultivation has begun to legislate.

The second instrument is a repertoire of subtractive operations, the operations by which a legislating practice is returned toward cultivation. The repertoire is subtractive because the constraint forbids the additive remedy, the imposition of a better rule, which would be a further legislation; what cultivation can do is remove the conditions under which the legislation operates rather than impose a corrected practice. The subtractive operations include the suspension of a hardened practice, its deliberate setting-aside for a season so that the parties may discover whether it is jointly wanted or merely established; the reopening of a foreclosed question, the deliberate return of a settled practice to the status of an open joint preference; the withdrawal of the language of rule, the deliberate redescription of a practice from obligation to preference; and the restoration of the other party's standing to revise, the deliberate cession, by the party who has come to administer a practice, of the authority to do so. These operations do not impose a just practice; they remove the conditions under which an unjust one is maintained, and return the relation's habit-forming dynamics to the joint authorship from which a just practice may, but need not, arise.

The third instrument is the preservation of betrayability, which the prior paper identified as the mark of a relation that has not foreclosed itself. A shared habit preserves betrayability when its continuance remains contingent on the continued joint willing of both parties, so that either could, in principle, decline it, and its continuance is therefore a renewed joint choice rather than a settled fact. A habit that has lost betrayability is one whose continuance no longer depends on being willed, that persists by its mere establishment and would persist against the will of a party who came to decline it; and such a habit, however benign its content, has become a legislation, since it binds independently of joint willing. The preservation of betrayability is the operational form of the cultivation-not-legislation constraint at the level of the individual habit: a practice is cultivated, and not legislated, to the extent that it remains betrayable, that its continuance remains a renewed joint choice and does not harden into a fact that binds without being willed. The maintenance of betrayability across the habits of a shared life is, accordingly, the central operational task of a just practice, and the signals and subtractive operations above are the instruments of its maintenance.

These three instruments, the signals of drift, the subtractive operations, and the preservation of betrayability, compose an operational vocabulary in which the cultivation-not-legislation constraint can be applied to the recurring practice of a shared life. They are offered to the subsequent papers as the operational form of a principle the present paper states, and they stand, like all the paper's operational apparatus, under the concession that they are instruments of a practice and not measurements of the value the practice serves.

2.9.4 The evidential component: supported practice and its limit

The evidential framework contributes to the moment of practice the resources of evidence-based practice: the body of controlled findings concerning which practices conduce, on average and in studied populations, to the maintenance and the deepening of a shared life. Such findings are a genuine resource. That certain practices of attention, of repair after conflict, of the just division of a shared life's labour, conduce on the evidence to its flourishing is a real gain for practice, that much of this sustaining labour is emotional labour, and is systematically under-recognised as labour, is argued by Hochschild (1983) and Folbre (2001); and to disregard it on the ground that each relation is singular would

be to discard a public and accumulable knowledge for a private intuition that is frequently mistaken.

The evidential component carries a limit that the operational concession has prepared. Evidence supports a practice by establishing that it produces a measured effect in a studied population; it speaks, therefore, in the register of the structured proxy, and of the average. It cannot establish what the cultivation of this shared life, in its singularity and its unsymbolised texture, requires, and it cannot reach the unsymbolised value in which the relation's good finally consists. The evidential component is thus a resource to be drawn upon and not a sufficient guide: it furnishes supported practices that the cultivation may employ, while the determination of what this shared life requires remains a matter of the joint and largely unsymbolised appraisal of §2.5, to which the evidence is an input and not a substitute.

2.9.5 The phenomenological component: the cultivation of attention

The phenomenological framework contributes to practice the cultivation of attention: the formation, as itself a habit, of a quality of attending to the other and to the shared life. The practice of a shared flourishing is not only the formation of dispositions to act but the formation of a disposition to attend, a settled readiness to perceive the other's state, the texture of the shared life, and the small alterations by which a relation rises or declines. This is the practical correlate of the basal appraisal of §2.5: since the relation is maintained by the continuous appraisal of its state, the cultivation of the quality of that appraisal, the formation of a fine and unbroken attention to the shared life, is among the principal practices of its flourishing. The cultivation of attention is, moreover, the practice least assimilable to legislation, since attention cannot be imposed as a rule but only formed as a disposition, and it is therefore the practice in which the cultivation-not-legislation constraint is most nearly automatic.

2.9.6 The frameworks in concert

The three components compose the practice of a shared flourishing. The virtue-theoretic framework supplies its form, the formation of disposition by habituation in the concrete fabric of the shared life. The evidential framework supplies supported practices the

cultivation may draw upon, within the limit that they are proxies and averages and not the singular requirement of this life. The phenomenological framework supplies the cultivation of attention, the disposition to appraise the shared life finely and without cease. And the whole stands under the constraint that the formation of disposition is a cultivation and not a legislation, a guidance of the relation's own habit-forming dynamics and not the possession of it. The practice so composed generates the value whose circulation the next moment of the cycle assesses; the cycle now turns to the moment of evaluation, at which the question is how a shared life so cultivated is to be assessed, and at what cost to the value the assessment cannot reach.

2.10. Evaluation: The Appraisal of a Shared Life and Its Cost

The cycle turns to evaluation in its explicit form. The basal appraisal of §2.5 runs continuously through every moment; the present moment is the deliberate, instrumented assessment undertaken at particular junctures, in which some aspect of the relation is brought to a structured and assessable form. This is the moment at which the operational concession (§2.2.3) is most consequential, and the moment at which the positivist framework is most directly drawn upon, though, as will appear, every framework has its own evaluative practice and the frameworks do not agree on what evaluation is. The section first sets out the several evaluative practices, then develops, as its principal contribution, a quantitative assessment of the justice of a relation's value cycle.

2.10.1 The several practices of evaluation

Evaluation is not one practice but several, drawn from the several frameworks, each assessing a different aspect in a different register.

The *biological* appraisal is the continuous interoceptive and affective evaluation of §2.5.1: the felt registration, beneath reflection, of how the relation stands. It is the most pervasive evaluation and the one conducted in the value nearest the real, and it is at the same time the least communicable and the least accountable, since it is unsymbolised. It is the ground the other evaluations structure, and not a competitor to them.

The *decision-theoretic* appraisal is the belief updating of §2.5.2: the revision, on the

evidence of the lived fabric, of each party's distribution over the state of the relation. It is evaluation in the register of probability rather than verdict, and it carries the recognition that the state assessed is hidden and the assessment therefore irreducibly uncertain.

The *psychological* appraisal is the structured self-report of appraisal theory and its instruments: the assessment of the relation through the parties' reports of their own appraisals, as in the measurement of relationship satisfaction. It renders the basal appraisal partially communicable by structuring it into reportable form.

The *positivist* evaluation is the measurement proper: the assessment of the relation by validated instruments yielding comparable and accumulable quantities. Its instruments are many, and they measure distinct things. Life-satisfaction and affect scales measure subjective well-being; quality-of-life instruments measure the conditions of a life; relationship-satisfaction and adjustment scales measure the parties' assessment of the relation; eudaimonic and self-determination instruments measure reported growth, autonomy, and the sense of an unfolding life. Representative instruments are, respectively, the satisfaction-with-life and affect scales (Diener et al. 1985; Watson et al. 1988), quality-of-life assessments (WHOQOL Group 1998), dyadic-adjustment scales (Spanier 1976), psychological well-being scales (Ryff 1989), and measures grounded in self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000; Deci and Ryan 1985); the eudaimonic turn in this measurement is represented by Seligman (2011). Each is a structured proxy, validated for its reliability and its correlation with other measures, and each is, within its operational limits, a real gain: public, comparable across relations and across time, and accumulable into a body of findings. The positivist evaluation is the developed form of explicit assessment, and the paper neither disparages it nor mistakes it for the appraisal of the real value it proxies.

The *phenomenological* evaluation is the thick description and the hermeneutic assessment of the shared life: the close interpretive characterisation of how a relation stands, conducted in narrative rather than number, and answerable to the lived meaning of the relation rather than to a comparable metric. It is evaluation that resists the structuring the positivist evaluation requires, on the ground that the structuring discards what is to be assessed, and it stands to the positivist evaluation as the interpretation of a text stands to the counting of its words.

These five practices do not agree on what evaluation is, and the disagreement is not to be resolved by the victory of one. They are evaluative phases, in the sense of §2.2.2: the positivist measures and is silent on what it cannot structure; the phenomenologist interprets and resists the metric; the decision-theorist quantifies uncertainty and the psychologist structures self-report; the biological appraisal grounds them all in a value none of them reaches. A relation is evaluated well when the practices are drawn upon together and none is mistaken for the whole, and most particularly when the structured measures are read as proxies and not as the appraisal of the real.

2.10.2 The instruments of explicit evaluation: a survey

The positivist evaluation of flourishing and of relationships has produced, over the past half-century, a substantial body of validated instruments, and the cultivation of a shared life that would assess itself explicitly draws upon them. This subsection surveys the principal instruments, classical and contemporary, and then locates them within the framework of the paper, in order to make precise both what they supply and what, by their construction, they cannot reach.

The principal instruments and what they measure

The instruments divide by the construct they target. A first family measures *subjective well-being* in the hedonic tradition, which construes well-being as life satisfaction together with the balance of positive over negative affect. The Satisfaction with Life Scale assesses the cognitive, evaluative component with five items (Diener et al. 1985); the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule assesses the affective component with twenty (Watson et al. 1988); and the tradition is gathered in Kahneman et al. (1999). A second family measures *eudaimonic well-being*, which construes well-being as the realisation of human potentials rather than the balance of feeling. Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being operationalise this in six dimensions, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, in forms of eighteen, forty-two, and eighty-four items (Ryff 1989; Ryff and Keyes 1995); self-determination theory supplies measures grounded in the satisfaction of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000; Deci and Ryan 1985); and the PERMA framework adds engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment to positive emotion (Seligman

2011). A third family measures *quality of life* through objective and mixed indicators, of which the World Health Organization’s quality-of-life assessment, covering physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains, is representative (WHOQOL Group 1998). A fourth family, central to the present paper, measures *relationship quality*: the Dyadic Adjustment Scale assesses the quality of a couple’s relationship with thirty-two items across consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression (Spanier 1976), while the Relationship Assessment Scale offers a brief, seven-item, unidimensional measure of global relationship satisfaction (Hendrick 1988).

Contemporary work has extended this measurement from the individual and the couple to the population and the globe, and from a single index to multidimensional batteries. National and international instruments now assess well-being at the level of whole societies. The World Happiness Report ranks more than one hundred and forty countries on a single life-evaluation question, the Cantril ladder, on which respondents place their lives between the worst (0) and the best (10) possible, averaged over a three-year window from the Gallup World Poll (Wellbeing Research Centre 2026). The OECD’s Better Life Index assesses well-being across eleven dimensions, among them housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance, drawn from twenty-four indicators and aggregated under user-assigned weights (OECD 2020). And the Global Flourishing Study, a longitudinal panel of more than two hundred thousand participants across twenty-two countries, measures flourishing across six domains, happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability (VanderWeele, Johnson, et al. 2025; VanderWeele 2017). These instruments are summarised in Table 2.3.

The instruments within the framework of this paper

The survey makes possible a precise statement of what the existing instruments supply to the assessment of a shared flourishing and what they do not. Located within the framework of this paper, each instrument proxies some component of the normative specification of §2.8.5, and the location reveals a systematic gap. The hedonic instruments proxy the felt quality of a life, an aspect of the eudaimonic condition, and they proxy it at the level of the aggregate or the mean, which is exactly the level at which

the maldistribution of return is invisible (§2.10.3). The eudaimonic instruments proxy the unfolding of each party's potentials, and so come nearest the eudaimonic condition of the unfolding of each, but they measure the individual's functioning in isolation and do not assess whether one party's unfolding is purchased by another's foreclosure. The relationship instruments proxy the parties' satisfaction with the relation, again at the level of each party's report, and a relation may score well on them while distributing its returns unjustly, since a favoured party's high satisfaction and an habituated party's adjusted satisfaction together yield an unremarkable aggregate. The macro instruments proxy well-being at the level of populations and are not addressed to the internal justice of a particular shared life at all.

The systematic gap is the condition of justice. No instrument in the survey measures whether the value a party generates returns to that party, nor whether one party is consigned to the low-return tail of §2.10.3; the instruments measure satisfaction, functioning, and conditions, each at the level of the party or the aggregate, and the distribution of return among the parties, relative to their coupling, is not among the constructs they target. This is not a defect of the instruments within their own traditions but a boundary of those traditions, and it is the boundary at which the paper's quantitative assessment of justice (§2.10.3) is directed. Table 2.4 locates the instruments within the framework, by the component of a just eudaimonia each proxies and by the moment of the cycle at which each is principally drawn upon, and it records, in its final column, that the condition of justice is the one no existing family of instruments supplies.

The two tables together state the contribution of the paper's quantitative assessment against the background of the existing instruments. The existing instruments, classical and contemporary, measure satisfaction, functioning, conditions, and their population aggregates, and they do so with a validity and an accumulability the paper does not match and does not attempt to match. What they do not measure, by the construction of the constructs they target, is the distribution of return among the parties of a relation, and so the condition of justice that the prior paper held to be constitutive of eudaimonia. The skew of the return distribution is offered as the structured proxy for exactly this gap: not a replacement for the existing instruments, but an addition orthogonal to them, addressed to the one component of a just eudaimonia that the survey shows no existing

family of instruments to register.

2.10.3 The quantitative assessment of justice

The paper now develops, as the principal contribution of this moment, a quantitative assessment directed at the condition of justice in the normative specification of §2.8.5. The condition of justice is that the value generated in the shared life circulates and returns to those who generate it, no party being reduced to a source from which value is extracted without return. The assessment of this condition admits of a structured proxy that makes visible a feature the satisfaction measures cannot, the systematic maldistribution of return that constitutes exploitation within an apparently satisfying relation. The assessment is offered under the operational concession throughout: it is a structured proxy for the justice of a relation's value cycle, operationally valuable and not a measurement of the relation's real worth.

Expected recyclability

The first quantity is the expected recyclability of value in the relation: the probability that a value generated by one party is met, within the relation, by a response that regenerates value in turn, rather than being absorbed without return. A contribution to a shared life, an act of care, an effort of attention, a piece of the relation's sustaining labour, may be met in one of three ways. It may be met by a response that itself generates value, an acknowledgement, a reciprocation, a deepening, so that the contribution sets a further turn of the cycle in motion; this is the recyclable case. It may be met by a response that neither regenerates nor depletes, a neutral absorption in which the contribution is received and nothing further follows; this is the lossy case. Or it may be met by a response that depletes, a contribution received and answered with a withdrawal or a demand for more, so that the act of giving leaves the giver with less than before; this is the extractive case. The expected recyclability is the probability, characteristic of the relation, that a contribution falls into the first case rather than the second or the third.

So defined, recyclability is the proxy proper to the condition of the cycle's life. A cycle sustains itself when the value it regenerates, turn upon turn, at least balances the value it loses to neutral absorption and extractive response; and whether it does so is governed

by the recyclability. There is a threshold: above a critical recyclability, contributions regenerate faster than they are lost, and the cycle of value is self-sustaining or growing; below it, contributions are lost faster than they regenerate, and the cycle winds down, its sustaining labour meeting diminishing response until the parties cease to contribute and the relation decays toward the extinction of §2.13. The condition is recognisable in its phenomenology. A relation of high recyclability is one in which giving feels generative, in which an effort made is met by a response that makes further effort worth making; a relation of low recyclability is one in which giving feels thankless, in which contributions disappear into a partner who receives without regenerating, and in which the giver, over time, contributes less because the contributions return nothing. The decline of recyclability below its threshold is the quantitative form of a relation's running down, and it is to be distinguished, as the next quantities require, from the maldistribution of return among the parties, which a relation of adequate aggregate recyclability may still exhibit.

Return relative to a coupling-based baseline

The second quantity concerns the distribution of return among the parties, assessed against a baseline set by the coupling of the relation. The intuition the quantity formalises is that the degree of return that is just is not fixed but depends on how deeply the parties are coupled. Coupling, here, is the degree to which the parties' goods are bound together, the extent to which what benefits one benefits the other and what the relation generates is held in common rather than apportioned. In a loosely coupled relation, say an association of convenience, the parties' goods are largely separate, and a contribution by one may justly yield most of its return outside the relation, to the contributor's separate good; little is owed back through the relation, because little was staked in common. In a deeply coupled relation, a shared life fully joined, the parties' goods are bound together, and a contribution by one is made into a common store from which return is owed back to its generator through the relation; much is owed back, because much was staked in common. The coupling thus sets a baseline expected return: the share of the value a party generates that, given the depth of the coupling, ought to circulate within the relation and return to that party rather than be absorbed elsewhere.

The baseline is what makes the assessment of return a normative and not merely a descriptive matter. To observe that a party's contributions return little to that party is

not yet to find an injustice, for in a loosely coupled relation little return is owed. The injustice is the shortfall of actual return below the baseline the coupling sets: a party in a deeply coupled relation, who has staked a shared life in common and whose contributions therefore ought to return to that party through the relation, but whose actual return falls systematically below that baseline, is a party from whom value is extracted under the very depth of coupling that ought to have returned it. This is the characteristic structure of exploitation within intimacy, and it is invisible to an assessment that does not set the baseline by the coupling: the deeply coupled party who is under-returned has given most and is owed most, and it is precisely the depth of the coupling, read without the baseline, that can be made to look like generosity freely given rather than value unjustly retained. The assessment compares the actual return to each party against the coupling-based baseline, and reads a systematic shortfall as extraction.

Skewness as the statistical fingerprint of injustice

The third quantity is the principal instrument of the assessment. Consider the distribution, across the parties and across time, of value returned relative to value generated. In a just relation, this distribution is, relative to the coupling-based baseline, approximately symmetric: returns are distributed among the generators in proportion to their generation, and no generator is systematically consigned to the low-return tail. In an exploitative relation, the distribution is skewed: value returns disproportionately to one party, while another party, characteristically the party who bears the larger share of the relation's sustaining labour, generates value that is systematically under-returned and is consigned to the tail of the distribution.

Skewness of the return distribution as the statistical fingerprint of injustice.

The injustice of a relation's value cycle has a statistical signature in the skewness of the distribution of returned value relative to the coupling-based baseline. A just cycle returns value to its generators in proportion to their generation and to the coupling, yielding a distribution that is approximately symmetric about the baseline. An exploitative cycle returns value disproportionately to one party and consigns another systematically to the

low-return tail, yielding a distribution skewed away from the under-returned party. The skewness of the return distribution is therefore a structured proxy for the injustice of the cycle, and it makes visible a maldistribution that aggregate measures of satisfaction conceal: a relation may exhibit high mean satisfaction while its return distribution is severely skewed, the high mean being the satisfaction of the over-returned party and the skew the signature of the other's exploitation. The skewness is read, under the operational concession, as a proxy for injustice and not as its measurement; a symmetric distribution is necessary but not sufficient for justice, and a skewed one is evidence of, and not identical to, exploitation.

The skewness measure has the methodological merit of being orthogonal to the satisfaction measures, and so of detecting what they systematically miss. An aggregate or mean measure of relational satisfaction is raised by the satisfaction of the over-returned party and is insensitive to the maldistribution beneath it; a relation can score well on mean satisfaction precisely because the party it favours is well satisfied, while the party it exploits is consigned to the tail. The skewness reads the shape of the distribution rather than its mean, and so detects the maldistribution the mean conceals. This is the formal counterpart, in the assessment of a relation, of the prior paper's thesis that a satisfaction purchased by the foreclosure of another is no eudaimonia: the mean satisfaction is high, and the relation is nonetheless unjust, and the injustice is legible in the skew.

The mechanism by which one party comes to occupy the low-return tail deserves to be made concrete, because it is the recurring structure the measure is designed to detect. A relation distributes, among other things, its sustaining labour: the work of attention, of care, of maintaining the household and the relationship itself, the emotional and reproductive labour without which the shared life does not continue. The systematic under-recognition of this labour as labour, and its uncompensated extraction, is documented by Hochschild (1983) and analysed in the economics of care by Folbre (2001). This labour generates value, much of it, since the shared life it sustains is the medium of the relation's whole flourishing. When this labour is borne disproportionately by one party, and when the value it generates returns disproportionately to the other, the bearer

of the sustaining labour is the party consigned to the tail: she generates a large share of the relation's value and receives a small share of its return, and the gap is the measure of her exploitation. The structure is the more durable for being concealed by its own ideology, in which the sustaining labour is figured as freely given, as natural to the one who bears it, or as no labour at all, so that its under-return is read not as extraction but as the order of things. The skewness measure is constructed to make this structure legible against that concealment: it does not ask whether the bearer of the labour reports satisfaction, which she may, having been habituated to expect no return, but whether the value she generates returns to her, which, in the exploitative case, it does not.

A contrast makes the orthogonality to the mean vivid. Consider two relations that score identically on a measure of mean satisfaction. In the first, both parties contribute to the sustaining labour, the value each generates returns to each in proportion to the coupling, and the return distribution is approximately symmetric; the shared mean satisfaction is the mark of a flourishing that both enjoy. In the second, one party bears almost all the sustaining labour and receives little return, while the other receives most of the relation's value and bears little of its cost; the over-returned party is highly satisfied, the under-returned party reports a satisfaction depressed but not absent, having adjusted her expectations to her position, and the mean of the two is, by construction, equal to the mean of the first relation. The mean satisfaction does not distinguish these relations; the skewness does. The first has a symmetric return distribution and the second a severely skewed one, and the skew of the second is the signature of an exploitation that the equal means conceal. The measure earns its place exactly here: it sees, in two relations a satisfaction survey would rank together, the difference between a flourishing both parties share and a flourishing one party extracts from the other.

A model for the test, and a hypothesis

The skewness measure presupposes a model, since a distribution of return cannot be assessed for its skewness without a model of how return is generated, against which the observed distribution is compared. The paper indicates the form of the required model without claiming to have validated it, in keeping with the concession. The relation is represented as a network whose nodes are the generators, the two parties and the coupled others, characteristically family, whose value the relation also circulates, and

whose edges carry the couplings, the weighted channels along which value propagates from one generator to another. Value generated at a node does not remain there; it propagates along the edges, a portion returning to its origin, a portion passing to coupled others, a portion lost from the network altogether. The propagation is modelled as a branching process on this network, in the manner of the prior series' formalisation of generative recursion: the mathematics of such propagation, in which quantities at nodes generate quantities at successors and the probability of eventual return is the object of interest, is the classical theory of branching processes (Harris 1963); value at a node produces, in expectation, value at adjacent nodes in proportion to the edge weights, each such product producing further value in turn, and the expected return to a generator is the probability, accumulated over all the paths by which value may travel and return, that value originating at that generator's node finds its way back to it. The coupling of the relation enters twice, as the topology of the network, which generators are joined to which, and as the weights on the edges, how strongly; and together these fix, for each generator, the coupling-based baseline of §2.10.3, the expected return that the coupling structure would yield were propagation unbiased, neither favouring nor disfavouring any generator beyond what the couplings themselves dictate.

On such a model a hypothesis test becomes statable, and its terms can be given exactly. Let the normalised return to a generator be its actual expected return divided by its coupling-based baseline, so that a value of one is the return the coupling alone would yield, a value above one a generator favoured beyond its coupling, and a value below one a generator disfavoured below it. The null hypothesis is that return is unbiased: that the normalised return is, in expectation, equal across generators, so that the distribution of normalised return is symmetric about its centre and no generator is systematically favoured or disfavoured beyond the coupling. The alternative is that return is systematically biased: that some generator, characteristically the bearer of the sustaining labour, has a normalised return whose expectation lies significantly below the others, so that the distribution is significantly skewed against that generator. The test statistic is the skewness of the observed distribution of normalised return, and the test asks whether an observed skew lies within the range compatible with the null of unbiased propagation or is large enough to reject it in favour of systematic extraction. The paper advances the form of this test, and not a validated instrument. The model requires assumptions that

have not here been discharged, on the propagation probabilities, on the independence of the branching, and on the stationarity of the couplings over the period of estimation; the estimation of returns in an actual relation, the assignment of value to acts of care and its tracing through the network, is a substantial empirical problem the paper does not solve; and the result, were it obtained, would be a structured proxy for injustice under the concession, evidence of extraction and not its measurement. The contribution is the form: that the justice of a relation's value cycle is, in principle and under the concession, a testable hypothesis about the skewness of a return distribution against a coupling-based baseline, and not a matter on which only impression can be brought to bear.

2.10.4 The operationalisation of return, and a worked illustration

The assessment of justice requires that the abstract notion of the return of value be operationalised into a quantity that could, in principle, be estimated; this subsection sets out the operationalisation and illustrates it on a deliberately simple example, under the operational concession throughout.

The operationalisation proceeds in four steps. First, the contributions of each party over a period are identified: the discrete acts of generation, the pieces of sustaining labour, the cared-for occasions, that each party contributes to the shared life. Second, to each contribution is assigned a value, in a common unit, proxying the value it generates for the shared life; the assignment is the most contestable step, and the concession applies most stringently here, since the value of an act of care is exactly the unsymbolised quantity the proxy cannot reach, and the assignment is an operational stipulation and not a measurement. Third, for each party the return is identified: of the value generated in the shared life, the portion that returns to that party, whether directly or through the relation's circulation. Fourth, the return to each party is normalised by the coupling-based baseline of §2.10.3, the return the coupling structure would yield under unbiased propagation, to give the normalised return on which the assessment of skewness is conducted.

A worked illustration, with stipulated numbers, shows the quantities in operation; the numbers are illustrative and carry no empirical claim. Consider a deeply coupled relation of two parties, *A* and *B*, over a period in which the shared life generates value, in the common unit, of 100. Suppose *B* bears the larger share of the sustaining labour and

generates 60 of this value, while *A* generates 40. In a just cycle, given the depth of the coupling, the return to each would be approximately proportional to generation: *B* would receive a return near 60 and *A* a return near 40, the normalised returns of both being near 1, and the distribution of normalised return approximately symmetric. Suppose instead that the relation returns value disproportionately to *A*: of the 100 generated, *A* receives a return of 65 and *B* a return of 35. The normalised return to *A* is then $65/40 \approx 1.6$ and to *B* is $35/60 \approx 0.58$. The distribution of normalised return is now skewed: *A* sits well above the baseline of 1, and *B* well below it, in the low-return tail. The skewness of the normalised-return distribution, negative for *B*, is the statistical fingerprint of §2.10.3, and it is legible here despite the relation's possibly high mean satisfaction, since *A*, the over-returned party, may report great contentment, and *B*, habituated to bearing the sustaining labour for little return, may report a satisfaction only moderately depressed, so that the mean of the two is unremarkable while the skew is severe. The illustration shows the quantities the assessment computes; it does not show that they can be estimated easily in an actual relation, which, as §2.10.3 stated, remains a substantial empirical problem the paper does not solve.

2.10.5 The evaluation of the unfolding of each

The condition of justice admits the structured proxy just developed. The eudaimonic condition, the unfolding of each party's own dynamics, is the most resistant to structuring, because it lies nearest the unsymbolised value the proxy cannot reach, and the paper records its resistance rather than overcoming it. Two proxies are nonetheless available and worth stating, under the concession.

The first is the rate at which each party's intended undertakings are in fact accomplished: the proportion of what a party sets out to be and to do that the party, within the shared life, achieves. The intended undertakings of a party are the projects, the developments, the becomings that party has reason to value and sets out upon, the unfolding of that party's own dynamics in concrete form: a body of work, a craft, a friendship, a course of study, a way of living the party means to grow into. The proxy tracks, over time, what proportion of these a party accomplishes rather than abandons. A shared life that sustains the unfolding of each is one in which each party's intended undertakings are, over time, accomplished at a rate that does not systematically decline, the relation making room for

and conducing to the development each sets out upon; a shared life that forecloses one party's unfolding is one in which that party's intended undertakings are systematically unaccomplished, the development that party set out upon stalling and then ceasing to be attempted. The rate of accomplishment is a coarse proxy, since not every intended undertaking ought to be accomplished and not every abandonment is a foreclosure, but a systematic decline in one party's rate, sustained over the seasons of a shared life, is a structured signature of a unfolding being foreclosed.

The second proxy refines the first by attributing the shortfall, and it is the more telling of the two. Of a party's intended undertakings that are not accomplished, the assessment distinguishes those not accomplished for reasons extraneous to the relation, the ordinary attrition of projects that any life suffers, from those not accomplished because the shared life foreclosed them: the undertakings a party set aside, deferred, or abandoned on account of the relation, because the relation's demands left no room for them, because the sustaining labour the party bore consumed the time and the energy they required, or because the party's development was tacitly understood, by both parties, to be the one that would yield. It is this attributed shortfall, and not the gross rate of abandonment, that proxies foreclosure. A party may accomplish few of their intended undertakings for reasons that have nothing to do with the relation, and a relation is not thereby indicted; but a party who systematically abandons their undertakings on account of the relation, while the other party's undertakings proceed, is a party whose unfolding the relation is foreclosing in favour of the other's. A systematically high proportion of intended undertakings foreclosed on account of the relation, concentrated in one party, is the proxy for the foreclosure of that party's unfolding, and it couples directly to the assessment of justice. The party whose unfolding the relation forecloses is characteristically the party consigned to the low-return tail of §2.10.3, for the same sustaining labour that returns little value to its bearer is what consumes the room her own undertakings would have required; the two proxies, the skew of return and the concentration of foreclosed undertakings, are two structured signatures of one exploitation, read in the register of value returned and in the register of development foreclosed.

The foreclosure of unfolding as a proxy coupled to the skew of return. The foreclosure of a party's unfolding admits a structured proxy in the proportion of that party's intended undertakings that are abandoned on account of the relation, and this proxy is coupled to the skew of the return distribution. The party whose unfolding the relation forecloses is characteristically the party from whom value is extracted without return, so that a concentration of foreclosed undertakings in one party and a skew of the return distribution against the same party are two signatures of a single injustice, the reduction of that party to the sustaining fuel of a relation that returns to it neither value nor the freedom to unfold. The proxies are read under the concession, as structured signatures of an exploitation they evidence and do not measure, and they leave the unsymbolised remainder of each party's unfolding beyond their reach.

2.10.6 The poetic condition, and the limit of evaluation

The third condition of the normative specification, that the cycle be sustained as a living and open movement rather than settled into a closed repetition, is the least amenable to structuring, and the paper records only the direction a proxy would take. The condition is that the relation's recurrences, its habits, its shared signs, its rituals, continue to accumulate an irreducible remainder on each traversal, the positive holonomy of the prior paper, rather than emptying into a repetition that returns nothing new. A proxy would assess whether the relation's recurrences are generative, whether a shared practice traversed again yields something not contained in its prior traversals, or have become a closed repetition traversed without gain. The paper does not develop a measure of this, and holds that it is at best semi-quantitative, since the accumulation of an irreducible remainder is close to the unsymbolised value that no structuring reaches. The poetic condition marks the limit at which the evaluation of a shared life passes beyond the structured proxy and returns to the basal and unsymbolised appraisal from which it was abstracted.

2.10.7 The standing of the whole evaluation

The evaluation developed in this section, in all its practices and proxies, stands under the operational concession, and the concession is to be restated as the section closes, because the next moment of the cycle, reflection, turns precisely on it. Every structured measure of this section, the satisfaction scales, the recyclability, the skew of return, the rate and attribution of accomplished undertakings, is a structured proxy for a value it does not reach, operationally valuable and incomplete. The measures are public where the basal appraisal is private, comparable where it is singular, accumulable where it is evanescent, and these are real gains that warrant the measures' use. The measures are, at the same time, structured symbolisations of an appraisal whose object is unsymbolised, and they discard exactly the remainder in which the relation's real value consists. To use them is to accept this exchange knowingly, for the operational gain it brings; to mistake them for the appraisal of the real value is the error the next moment of the cycle, reflection, exists to correct.

2.11. Reflection: The Re-examination of the Evaluation

The cycle turns to reflection, the re-examination of the evaluation and of the cognition that framed it. The task of this moment is to hold the structured results of evaluation against the value they proxy and do not reach, and so to prevent the structured measure from being mistaken for the appraisal of the real. The moment draws upon the normative and the virtue-theoretic frameworks, which return here to reassert what the measures cannot contain, and upon the phenomenological framework, which reasserts the lived meaning the structuring discarded. It is the moment at which the operational concession is most stringently enforced, and the moment that prevents the evaluation of §2.10 from hardening into a possessed truth about the relation.

2.11.1 The blindness of the measures, and forged flourishing

The first work of reflection is to recall what the measures cannot register. A high score on a satisfaction scale is compatible with a relation that is unjust, since the mean satisfaction is raised by the contentment of a favoured party and is insensitive to the maldistribution beneath it (§2.10.3); it is compatible with a relation that forecloses one party's unfolding,

since the foreclosed party may report satisfaction with a life it has been habituated to expect nothing more from; and it is compatible with a relation whose cycle has settled into a closed repetition that returns nothing new, since the comfort of the familiar registers as satisfaction. A relation may, in short, score well and be a forged flourishing: a satisfaction that has the measurable marks of the good without its reality, in the manner the prior paper analysed as the forged holonomy, the closed cycle that wears the appearance of the spiral.

Measured satisfaction is compatible with forged flourishing. A high measured satisfaction is necessary neither for nor sufficient for a just eudaimonia. It is compatible with injustice, since an aggregate measure is insensitive to the skew of return; with the foreclosure of a party's unfolding, since a foreclosed party may report contentment with a diminished expectation; and with a closed and depleting repetition, since familiarity registers as satisfaction. The measured satisfaction is therefore a structured proxy that a forged flourishing can satisfy, and the work of reflection is to read the measures against the conditions they cannot register, the skew of return, the foreclosure of unfolding, and the closure of the cycle, and so to distinguish a measured satisfaction that marks a real flourishing from one that marks a forged one.

This is the point at which the orthogonal instruments of §2.10 earn their place. The satisfaction measure alone cannot distinguish the real flourishing from the forged, since both score well on it. The skew of return and the concentration of foreclosed undertakings can distinguish them, since the forged flourishing, however high its mean satisfaction, exhibits the skew and the foreclosure that the real flourishing does not. Reflection is the moment at which the satisfaction measure is read against these orthogonal proxies, and a high satisfaction accompanied by a severe skew is recognised for what it is, the contentment of the favoured party in an unjust relation.

2.11.2 The return of the question of justice

The second work of reflection is to reassert the question of justice, which the aggregate measures structurally suppress. An evaluation conducted in means and totals asks how satisfying the relation is, and does not ask to whom its satisfactions accrue and at whose cost. Reflection reasserts the second question. It reads the skew of the return distribution as evidence of who is consigned to the low-return tail; it reads the concentration of foreclosed undertakings as evidence of whose unfolding the relation forecloses; and it identifies, where these signatures coincide, the party reduced to the sustaining fuel of the relation, the party who generates value that does not return and whose own unfolding is set aside on account of a shared life that returns to it neither. The question of justice is the question the prior paper held to be constitutive of eudaimonia rather than additional to it, and reflection is the moment at which it is brought to bear on the results of evaluation, against the tendency of the aggregate measures to suppress it.

2.11.3 The evaluation may not be possessed as the truth of the relation

The third work of reflection is the most consequential, and it is the point at which the operational concession bears most stringently. The structured evaluation of a relation, once conducted, presents a standing temptation: to be taken as the truth of the relation, the authoritative account of how things stand, against which the parties' own appraisals are to be corrected. To yield to this temptation is to commit, in the register of evaluation, the error the prior paper identified as the cardinal one.

The evaluation may not be possessed as the truth of the relation. The structured evaluation of a relation is an operationally warranted proxy, and it may not be possessed as the truth of the relation. To take the measure as the truth, as the authoritative account against which the parties' own appraisals are to be corrected, is to install the evaluation in the place of the barred Other: to treat a structured proxy as the standpoint from which the real value of the relation is known, which is the standpoint the series has established does not exist. The error repeats, in the register of evaluation, the cardinal error of the prior paper, the private certainty of one's own goodness, now as the certainty

conferred by a measure; and it is the same occupation of the place of the Other, the same settling of an open and unsymbolised appraisal into a possessed and closed determination. The authority of the evaluation is operational, defeasible, and answerable to the basal appraisal it proxies; it is an instrument of the relation's continued appraisal of itself, and not a verdict upon the relation delivered from outside it. The measure is to be used and not believed, consulted and not obeyed, held as a proxy and never possessed as the truth.

This is the deepest cut of the operational concession. The concession permitted the structured measure, for its operational gain, on the understanding that it is a proxy for a value it does not reach. Reflection enforces the understanding by refusing the measure the authority of truth: the moment the evaluation is possessed as the truth of the relation, the concession is broken, and the proxy that was admitted as an instrument becomes a new metalanguage, a structured idol installed in the place the series has kept empty. The measure that said a relation was well is not the relation's being well, and the measure that said it was ill is not the relation's being ill; both are proxies, to be weighed in the continued appraisal that no measure concludes. Reflection keeps the place of the Other empty against the measure's claim to fill it, and so returns the evaluation to its standing as an instrument of a self-appraisal that remains, in the end, unsymbolised and unconcluded.

2.11.4 Reflection as the safeguard of the cycle

The three works of reflection together safeguard the cycle against the characteristic failures of its evaluative moment. Reading the measures against forged flourishing safeguards against the complacency of a high score; reasserting the question of justice safeguards against the suppression of cost by aggregate; and refusing the measure the authority of truth safeguards against the installation of a structured idol in the place of the real. Reflection is, in this respect, the moment at which the cycle protects itself from its own instruments, and it prepares the moment of re-cognition by returning, corrected and chastened, to the cognition with which the cycle began. The relation that has reflected

does not carry forward its measures as truths; it carries forward a revised and re-opened appraisal, in which the measures have been weighed and found to be proxies, and the question of how things really stand between the two has been returned to the unsymbolised register in which it is finally settled, and never finally settled. The cycle now turns to re-cognition, in which this revised appraisal becomes the cognition of a further turn.

2.12. Re-cognition: The Closing and Reopening of the Turn

The cycle turns to re-cognition, the moment at which the revised and reopened appraisal carried out of reflection becomes the cognition with which a further turn begins. The task of this moment is the least like a discrete operation and the most like a passage: it is the carrying forward of what the turn has accumulated into the cognition of the next, and it is the point at which the lifecycle is seen to be a spiral rather than a circle. The moment is brief to state and consequential in what it establishes about the cycle as a whole.

2.12.1 Re-cognition is not a return to the initial cognition

The cognition with which a turn of the cycle ends is not the cognition with which it began. The turn has passed through practice, through the evaluation of what the practice generated, and through the reflection that read the evaluation against the value it could not reach; and the cognition that emerges carries the accumulated difference. What the parties take their flourishing to consist in, at the close of a turn, has been altered by the turn: deepened where the turn ascended, narrowed where it declined, and in either case not identical to the cognition that opened it. Re-cognition is this altered cognition, and the lifecycle is therefore not a circle that returns to its starting point but a spiral that returns to the starting configuration bearing the phase the turn accumulated.

Re-cognition carries the holonomy of the turn. The cognition with which a turn of the cycle closes differs from the cognition with which it opened by the phase the turn has accumulated, and re-cognition is the carrying of this difference into the next turn. The

lifecycle is accordingly a spiral and not a circle: it returns to the moment of cognition, but to a cognition altered by the turn, and the accumulated alteration over many turns is the long ascent or the long decline of a shared life. A turn that ascends returns a deepened cognition of the good, enriched by what the turn generated and corrected by what reflection found; a turn that declines returns a narrowed cognition, impoverished by what the turn depleted; and a turn traversed without ascent or decline returns the cognition unchanged, the closed circle of a repetition that goes round without rising. Re-cognition is the moment at which the phase of the turn is registered in the cognition of the next, and through which the holonomy of the lifecycle accumulates across the history of a relation.

2.12.2 The accumulation across the time of a relation

The registration of each turn's phase in the cognition of the next is the mechanism by which a shared life rises or declines across its history. A relation is many nested turns (§2.6.3), and the re-cognition that closes each turn sets the cognition of the next, so that the phases compound: a relation whose turns severally ascend compounds its ascent, its cognition of the good deepening turn upon turn, its practice enriching, its parties developing through the shared life into more than they were; a relation whose turns severally decline compounds its decline, however intact its outward form. The passage from courtship through marriage into the later years is, on this account, the compounding of the phases of its turns, and the difference between a shared life that has flourished across its arc and one that has declined across it is the accumulated holonomy of its many turns, registered at each re-cognition and carried into each successive cognition.

This is the point at which the lifecycle's relation to the time of a real shared life is most concrete. The marriage at which a relation arrives is not the completion of the cycle but a re-cognition of unusual depth, a turn at which the cognition of the good is reconceived under the altered conditions of a life now formally and practically joined; and the later years are the compounding of the turns that follow it. The cognition of flourishing is, across this arc, never fixed and never finally attained, but reconceived at each re-cognition

in the light of what the prior turns have made of the parties and of their shared life. The good of a shared life is, in this respect, not a destination the cycle approaches but the very substance of its turning, generated and reconceived at each turn and accumulated, for better or worse, across them all.

2.12.3 The openness of the spiral

The spiral does not close. Re-cognition opens a further turn, and there is no final re-cognition at which the cognition of the good is fixed once and for all and the cycle comes to rest in a completed understanding. To suppose such a final re-cognition would be to suppose a state of achieved and possessed flourishing, the closed circle of a cognition that no longer revises, which is, by the argument of §2.6.2, not the completion of the relation but its cessation. The good of a shared life is unguaranteeable and processual, in the sense the prior paper established, and its cognition is correspondingly unfinished: reconceived at each turn, never possessed as a final understanding, and carried forward into a further turn that the cycle, so long as the relation lives, continues to open. Re-cognition is therefore not the cycle's conclusion but its renewal, and the lifecycle, considered as a whole, is an open spiral that the relation sustains by continuing to turn. The paper now considers this whole, in the three regimes its turning may assume.

2.13. The Good, the Catastrophic, and the Extinguished Cycle

The paper has traversed the moments of a single turn. It now considers the cycle as a whole, in the regimes its turning may assume across the history of a relation. Three regimes are distinguished, by the conjunction of two questions: whether the cycle persists, and, if it persists, what sign of phase it accumulates. The two questions are not of the same order. The first concerns the existence of the relation, the second its character; and the regimes they jointly define are the flourishing spiral, the catastrophic cycle, and extinction.

2.13.1 Persistence and phase as two questions

The dynamical vocabulary of §2.4 distinguishes two features of a cyclic system that bear on a relation. The first is whether the system sustains its cyclic movement at all, or

decays toward the terminal rest of a fixed point. The second, for a system that does sustain its movement, is the phase it accumulates around a turn, positive, vanishing, or negative. These are independent: a cycle may persist with a positive phase, persist with a negative phase, or fail to persist; and the three regimes of a relation are the three outcomes of this pair of questions, the fourth combination, a non-persisting cycle with a phase, being empty, since a cycle that does not persist accumulates no phase.

Three regimes from two questions. The regime of a relation is fixed by two independent questions: whether its cycle persists, and, if it persists, what sign of phase it accumulates over a turn. A persisting cycle of positive phase is a flourishing spiral, which ascends as it turns. A persisting cycle of negative phase is a catastrophic cycle, which persists while depleting, descending as it turns. A cycle that does not persist is extinction, the decay of the relation's movement toward the terminal rest in which value is no longer generated or returned. The question of persistence is prior to the question of phase, since a cycle that does not persist has no phase; the gravest condition of a relation is therefore not the negative phase but the failure of persistence, and the catastrophic cycle, for all its depletion, is a living relation in a way that extinction is not.

2.13.2 The flourishing spiral

The flourishing spiral is the regime of the good cycle. Its value is generated and returned, its recyclability sustains the cycle above the threshold of decay, its return distribution is, relative to the coupling, approximately symmetric, and the unfolding of each party is sustained rather than foreclosed. Across its turns it accumulates a positive phase: the parties' cognition of the good deepens, their practice enriches, and they develop, through the shared life, into more than they were. The flourishing spiral is the regime the normative specification of §2.8.5 describes, and it is, by the argument to follow, necessarily a just regime: the symmetry of its return distribution is the condition of its positive phase, and a relation whose return is severely skewed cannot sustain the ascent

of all its parties, since the party consigned to the tail is depleted rather than developed by the turning.

2.13.3 The catastrophic cycle

The catastrophic cycle is the regime of the bad cycle that nonetheless persists. Its movement is sustained, its form is intact, and it may score well on aggregate satisfaction; but it accumulates a negative phase, depleting its parties, or one of them, turn upon turn. This is the regime in which the orthogonal instruments of §2.10 do their characteristic work, for it is the regime a satisfaction measure cannot distinguish from the flourishing spiral, both persisting and both capable of a high mean, while the skew of return and the concentration of foreclosed undertakings distinguish them, the catastrophic cycle exhibiting the skew and the foreclosure that the flourishing spiral does not. The catastrophic cycle is the marriage that endures and depletes, the form maintained while one party, or both, is consumed in the maintaining; and it is the regime in which the injustice of a relation is most consequential, since its persistence prolongs the extraction that its intact form conceals.

2.13.4 Extinction

Extinction is the regime in which the cycle ceases to turn. Value is no longer generated, circulated, or returned; the parties no longer revise their sense of one another; practice halts; and the relation decays toward the terminal rest in which it is a relation no longer. Extinction is not a benign equilibrium, a relation at peaceful rest, but the cessation of the activity by which the relation existed (§2.6.2). It is the gravest regime in the order of existence, since it is the end of the relation as such, though it is not the gravest in the order of justice, since a catastrophic cycle may inflict, in its persistence, a depletion that an extinction would have ended. The relation between extinction and the catastrophic cycle is, in this respect, genuinely tragic: the persistence that distinguishes the catastrophic cycle from extinction is also the persistence of its extraction, and the cessation that would end the extraction is also the end of the relation.

2.13.5 Bifurcation between the regimes

The passage of a relation between these regimes need not be gradual. As the conditions of a relation drift, its slowly varying parameters in the sense of §2.4.5, its behaviour may change smoothly through a range and then, at a critical value, change in kind: a flourishing spiral may, as its recyclability declines past a threshold, lose the persistence of its ascent and tip into a catastrophic cycle or toward extinction; a catastrophic cycle may, as its depletion exhausts the conditions of its persistence, tip into extinction; and a relation near a threshold may be carried across it by a small further change in its sustaining conditions. This is the dynamical content of an observation common to the experience of relations, that their decline is often not gradual but punctuated, a long apparent stability followed by a rapid passage into a different regime. The language of bifurcation renders this: the difference between regimes is a difference in kind, and a relation may be carried from one to another by a change in degree that crosses a critical value, so that a small neglect, compounded, may tip a relation across a threshold from which its return is not symmetric to its approach.

2.13.6 Justice as the internal condition of the good cycle

The section closes by establishing the thesis toward which the regimes have been arranged: that justice is not an external constraint upon the flourishing spiral but the internal condition of its persistence with positive phase.

Justice is the internal condition of the flourishing spiral. The flourishing spiral, the persisting cycle of positive phase, is necessarily just, and the catastrophic cycle is the form that injustice takes in a persisting relation. A cycle whose return distribution is severely skewed cannot accumulate a positive phase for all its parties, since the party consigned to the low-return tail is depleted, not developed, by the turning; its phase, for that party, is negative, and the cycle is for that party catastrophic however it appears in the aggregate. A positive phase for all the parties therefore requires a return distribution that is not severely skewed, which is to say it requires the condition of justice. Justice is, accordingly, not a constraint added to the flourishing of a relation from outside it, but the

internal condition under which a cycle can ascend for all its parties rather than for some at the cost of others. This is the dynamical form of the prior paper's thesis that justice constitutes rather than constrains eudaimonia, and the skew of the return distribution (§2.10.3) is its statistical signature: a relation is a flourishing spiral only if its return is, relative to its coupling, approximately symmetric, and a severely skewed return is the signature of a catastrophic cycle wearing, in the aggregate, the appearance of a spiral.

The three regimes, so arranged, gather the results of the paper into a single dynamical picture. A relation lives by the persistence of its cycle and flourishes by the positive phase of its turning, and it flourishes for all its parties only if its turning is just. The instruments of evaluation proxy these features, the recyclability proxying persistence, the skew proxying the justice on which the positive phase depends, and the satisfaction measures proxying an aggregate that conceals the distinction the skew reveals; and the moments of the cycle cultivate them, the practice forming the habits that sustain the turning, the reflection guarding against the forged appearance of a spiral, and the recognition carrying the phase of each turn into the next. The paper now concludes, in the plural conclusions its method requires.

2.14. A Longitudinal Case: One Shared Life through the Cycle

The machinery the paper has developed is abstract, and a foundational treatment is strengthened by an extended case in which the abstractions are seen to operate together on a single shared life across its course. This section supplies such a case. The couple is constructed and anonymous, a composite and not a record, and the numbers, where they appear, are stipulated and illustrative under the operational concession (§2.2.3); the case claims no empirical authority and serves only to display the machinery in concerted operation. The two parties are called A and B throughout. The case is organised by the seasons of a shared life, and within each season the moments of the cycle and the frameworks drawn upon are traced, so that the reader may see the matrix of §2.7 instantiated in a particular life and the regimes of §2.13 approached and, at the last, chosen between.

2.14.1 Courtship: the first turns of the cycle

In the first season the cycle turns quickly and its turns are small. A and B, meeting, begin to cognise what a shared life between them might be: at first in the lived and largely unsymbolised register of the phenomenological framework (§2.8.3), the felt sense that there is something here, an apprehension preceding its articulation; then, as the season advances, in the normative register, as each begins to apprehend what they would value in a life shared with the other, and whether the other's unfolding and their own can be sustained together. The practice of this season is light, the cultivation of small recurrences, a way of spending time, a rhythm of contact, the first habits of attention, and the virtue-theoretic framework (§2.9.1) is already in operation, though the dispositions it forms are as yet shallow, the *hexis* not yet set. Evaluation is continuous and almost wholly basal (§2.5), each appraising, beneath reflection, whether the relation is rising; explicit evaluation is rare and informal. The recyclability of value (§2.10.3) is high, since in this season contributions are met by regenerating responses readily, and the cycle turns with a positive phase, each turn returning to the parties a deepened cognition of the good of the relation. The holonomy of the season is strongly positive: the parties end it developed by it, knowing more of what they value and of one another, the spiral ascending.

2.14.2 The forming of a joined life: marriage and its re-cognition

The passage to a joined life is a re-cognition of unusual depth (§2.12.1). The cognition of the good is reconceived under altered conditions, the relation now formally and practically joined, the couple's goods now deeply coupled in the sense of §2.10.3, so that much of the value each generates is now owed back through the relation. The practice of this season is the formation of the household and its manner, the *habitus* of §2.9.1, and it is here that the cultivation-not-legislation constraint (§2.9.2) first bears weight: as the couple forms the recurring practices of a joined life, the division of its sustaining labour, the rhythms of its days, the question arises, at first unremarked, whether these practices are jointly authored and revisable or are settling, by the gradual mechanism of habituation (§2.9.1), into a regime one administers and the other keeps. In the case as constructed, the season is one of high mean satisfaction: both parties report contentment, the relation is manifestly persisting, and an explicit evaluation by the instruments of §2.10.2 would record a flourishing relation.

Beneath the high mean, however, a skew is beginning to form. B has assumed the larger share of the sustaining labour, and the value this labour generates returns disproportionately to A, whose own undertakings proceed while B's are increasingly deferred. The skew of the return distribution (§2.10.3) is, in this season, slight, and it is concealed by the high mean satisfaction and by the season's genuine warmth; the basal appraisal of both parties registers the relation as good, B not yet having symbolised the accumulating deferral of B's own unfolding. This is the season in which the divergence between the genuine and the forged spiral (§2.13.6) originates, unremarked, in a distribution whose skew is not yet large enough to disturb the felt warmth that conceals it.

2.14.3 The middle years: the bifurcation approached

In the middle years the slight skew, compounded turn upon turn, grows. The mechanism is the one the paper has described: each turn of the cycle returns to A a developed cognition and an accomplished undertaking, and to B a deferred undertaking and a labour unreturned, and the re-cognition that closes each turn (§2.12.2) carries this asymmetry forward, so that the cognition of the good with which each successive turn begins is, for A, enriched, and for B, narrowed. The holonomy of the cycle has become, in the terms of §2.13.6, positive for A and negative for B: the same cycle that develops A depletes B, and the relation is, for B, already a catastrophic cycle (§2.13.3) wearing, in the aggregate, the appearance of a flourishing spiral.

This is the season in which the orthogonal measures of the paper do their work. The mean satisfaction remains moderately high, raised by A's contentment and by B's still-only-partially-symbolised appraisal; an evaluation by satisfaction alone would not register the developing injustice. The skew of the return distribution, by contrast, is now pronounced, B's normalised return having fallen well below the baseline the deep coupling sets (§2.10.4), and the concentration of foreclosed undertakings in B (§2.10.5) is marked. The two orthogonal signatures coincide on B, identifying B as the party consigned to the low-return tail and the party whose unfolding the relation forecloses, the two faces of the single injustice the paper has described. The relation is approaching a bifurcation (§2.13.5): the slight skew, compounded, has brought it near a threshold at which its regime may change in kind.

2.14.4 The turning point: reflection and the choice of regime

The bifurcation is reached at a moment of reflection (§2.11). In the case as constructed, B's appraisal at last symbolises what the basal register has long registered: that B's undertakings have been systematically foreclosed and B's labour systematically unreturned, that the relation has been, for B, a catastrophic cycle. This symbolisation is the work of reflection in its sharpest form, the reading of the relation's measured and felt satisfaction against the skew and the foreclosure the satisfaction concealed (§2.11.1), and the reassertion of the question of justice that the high mean had suppressed (§2.11.2). The relation now stands at the bifurcation, and the paper's three regimes (§2.13) are the three paths from it.

The first path is the continuation of the catastrophic cycle: the skew is acknowledged and not corrected, B's symbolised grievance is met by A's reassertion of the existing distribution, perhaps by the legislation of the existing habits as the rule of the relation (§2.9.2), and the cycle persists in its depleting form, B now depleted knowingly rather than unawares. The second path is extinction (§2.13.4): the skew is acknowledged and found uncorrectable, and the cycle ceases to turn, the relation decaying toward the terminal rest in which it is a relation no longer. The third path is the restoration of a flourishing spiral: the skew is acknowledged and corrected, the sustaining labour redistributed, B's foreclosed undertakings reopened, the coupling-based return restored toward symmetry, and the cycle resumes a turning that ascends for both. The third path is the just one, not because it preserves the relation, which the first also does, nor because it ends the extraction, which the second also does, but because it restores the condition under which the cycle can ascend for both parties rather than for one at the cost of the other (§2.13.6). The case does not stipulate which path is taken, since the paper has argued that the good of a shared life is unguaranteeable (§2.12.3) and no machinery determines the choice; it displays the bifurcation and the three regimes between which the reflection of this season must choose.

2.14.5 What the case displays

The case displays the machinery of the paper in concerted operation: the cycle turning through its moments and seasons (§2.6), the frameworks drawn upon at each moment

(§2.7), the basal and explicit registers of appraisal (§2.5), the divergence of the mean from the distribution and the consequent divergence of the genuine from the forged spiral (§2.10.3, §2.13.6), the compounding of holonomy across turns (§2.12.2), the coincidence of the skew of return with the foreclosure of unfolding as two signatures of one injustice (§2.10.5), and the bifurcation at which a relation's regime is chosen. It displays, above all, the paper's central practical claim: that a relation may be, for one of its parties, a catastrophic cycle while presenting to measurement and even to the parties' own unreflective appraisal as a flourishing one, and that the work of reflection is to read the satisfaction against the distribution it conceals, so that the injustice may be symbolised and the bifurcation reached at which it may, though it need not, be corrected. The case is constructed and proves nothing; it shows what the paper's machinery, applied to a shared life, makes visible, and it is offered as the concrete display of an apparatus whose general statement the preceding sections supply.

2.15. The Cross-Cultural Variation of Flourishing and Its Practice

The account developed so far has proceeded at a level of generality that abstracts from the cultural particularity of the shared lives it concerns, and this abstraction, useful for the statement of structure, conceals a variation that a foundational treatment must address. The conception of flourishing, the practices through which a shared life is cultivated, the standards by which it is evaluated, and the very methods by which it is studied vary across cultures, and the variation is not noise around a universal mean but a systematic difference in what flourishing is taken to be and how it is pursued. This section addresses three strands of this variation: the cross-cultural variation in the conception of happiness and flourishing, the variation across scholarly traditions in the method by which flourishing is studied, and the variation across cultures in the practices of marriage and family. It then locates the variation within the lifecycle, treating each moment of the cycle as the site of a culturally specific cognition and practice. Before the strands are taken up, the basis on which cultures are selected and compared is stated, so that the comparison proceeds by a method rather than by an unexamined choice of cases. The section draws throughout on the operational concession and on the framework of symmetry-broken phases (§2.2.2), of which the cultural variation is a further and consequential instance.

2.15.1 The basis of the comparison: method and case selection

A comparison across cultures requires a principled basis for the selection of the cultures compared and for the dimensions along which they are compared, on pain of mistaking an arbitrary choice of cases for a representative sample of human variation. The comparative method in the social sciences supplies two complementary logics of case selection, both descending from Mill's methods of agreement and difference (Mill 1843) and systematised for social inquiry by Przeworski and Teune (1970). The most-similar-systems design selects cases alike in most respects and differing in the variable of interest, so that a difference in outcome may be attributed to that variable; the most-different-systems design selects cases differing in most respects, so that a shared outcome may be attributed to the few factors they hold in common (Lijphart 1971). The two designs are the principal means of managing the comparison of a small number of complex cases.

The cultures to be compared are located on an empirically derived map of cultural variation, so that their selection may be assessed for coverage and representativeness rather than asserted. The most developed such map is the one derived by Inglehart and Welzel from the World Values Survey, which resolves cross-national variation into two principal dimensions, a dimension from traditional to secular-rational values and a dimension from survival to self-expression values, and which locates national cultures in clusters shaped by their religious and historical heritage, among them the Protestant European, the Catholic European, the English-speaking, the Confucian or East Asian, the Latin American, the Orthodox, the South Asian, and the African-Islamic (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Comparable coordinate systems are supplied by Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, of which the individualism-collectivism dimension is the one most pertinent here (Hofstede 2001), and by Schwartz's cultural value orientations (Schwartz 2006). These maps make the selection of cases assessable: a selection covers the variation well to the extent that it spans the principal clusters, and a case represents its cluster to the extent that it is typical of it.

The present treatment selects its cases on this basis, and states the selection openly. Four cultures are taken as the cases of detailed analysis, China, Japan, Continental Europe, and the United States, and the selection is a combination of the two comparative designs. China and Japan are two cases within the East Asian, broadly Confucian cluster, alike in

their interdependent heritage and differing in its present configuration, and Continental Europe and the United States are two cases within the Western cluster, alike in their independent heritage and differing in their institutional and methodological traditions; the within-cluster pairs constitute most-similar comparisons, and the between-cluster contrast of the Western with the East Asian pair constitutes a most-different comparison. The selection is, deliberately, weighted toward the cultures the present writer is best placed to treat with care, and it is for that reason a selection of cases for detailed analysis and not a claim to global coverage. Its limitation is therefore stated plainly: the four cases span the principal axis of individualism and interdependence but do not span the full cultural map, and several major clusters, the South Asian, the African-Islamic, the Latin American, and the Orthodox, enter the treatment only as points of contrast and not as cases of detailed analysis. Where they bear on the argument they are noted, in particular the South Asian institution of arranged marriage and the joint family, the Latin American combination of collectivism with an actively expressed positive emotionality that differs from the East Asian emotional balance, and the Islamic configuration of kinship obligation; but the detailed analysis remains that of the four core cases, and the conclusions are offered with the representativeness this selection affords and no more.

2.15.2 The cross-cultural variation in the conception of flourishing

The conception of happiness itself varies across cultures, and the principal axis of variation is the one between an independent and an interdependent construal of the self and its flourishing. In the cultural-psychological tradition, the European-American model of the self is independent, defined in terms of individual attributes, autonomy, and the pursuit of personal goals, while the East Asian model is interdependent, defined in terms of social relationships and the adjustment of the self to a relational whole (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Happiness is construed accordingly. In North American contexts, happiness tends to be defined in terms of personal achievement, and individuals are motivated to maximise positive affect and to seek happiness through autonomous agency; in East Asian contexts, happiness tends to be defined in terms of interpersonal connectedness and the balance of the self with others (Uchida et al. 2004). The difference extends to the structure of emotional experience: where the North American construal seeks to maximise positive over negative affect, the East Asian construal tends toward a dialectical balance in which

positive and negative affect are held together rather than the former maximised, and in which happiness is understood as fraught with potential social consequence rather than as an unalloyed good to be pursued (Uchida and Kitayama 2009). The interdependent construal has been developed into a distinct conception of interdependent happiness, predicated on interpersonal harmony, quiescence, and ordinariness rather than on personal high arousal (Hitokoto and Uchida 2015).

This variation bears directly on the conception of flourishing the present series has developed, and the bearing is instructive rather than merely cautionary. The series has construed flourishing as the unfolding of each party's own dynamics, sustained within a shared life whose value circulates and returns; the conception is neither purely independent, since the unfolding is sustained within and returns to a relation, nor purely interdependent, since it is the unfolding of each that is at issue and not the submersion of each in a relational whole. The conception occupies, deliberately, a position between the independent and interdependent construals, and the cross-cultural evidence locates it: it is a conception for which the relation is the medium of each party's development and the development is genuinely of each, which is neither the autonomous self-development of the independent model nor the relational adjustment of the interdependent one, but a structure in which the two are made compatible by the requirement that the relation return to each what each gives. The cultural variation is, in the terms of §2.2.2, a set of symmetry-broken phases of the cognition of flourishing, the independent and interdependent construals being two such phases, and the series' conception an attempt to articulate a structure of which both are partial determinations.

2.15.3 The comparative variation in the method of study

A second variation, less often remarked in connection with the first but consequential for a foundational treatment, is the variation across scholarly traditions in the method by which flourishing and the shared life are studied. The methodological division between an explanatory, quantitative, positivist social science and an interpretive, qualitative, hermeneutic one is itself culturally and geographically patterned, and the pattern bears on the framework-divide of §2.2.2.

The interpretive tradition originates in the nineteenth-century German distinction be-

tween the natural and the human sciences, the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, and in the corresponding distinction between explanation, *Erklären*, the method of the natural sciences, and understanding, *Verstehen*, the method of the human sciences, drawn by Droysen and Dilthey and developed by Weber (Dilthey 1989; Weber 1949). On this tradition, the social world is constituted by the meanings its participants give it, and its study requires the interpretive recovery of those meanings, the production of what Geertz called thick description, which penetrates the webs of significance within which human action is intelligible rather than reducing action to observable behaviour (Geertz 1973). The positivist tradition, by contrast, holds that the social world is continuous with the natural, that it is to be studied by the observation and measurement of behaviour and the discovery of regularities, and that what cannot be brought to measurement cannot be known. The two traditions are unevenly distributed: the interpretive and hermeneutic tradition has been more central to Continental European social thought, while the positivist and quantitative tradition has been more dominant in American social science, a difference of scholarly culture that patterns how flourishing is studied on either side.

This methodological variation is, for the present paper, the framework-divide of §2.2.2 appearing at the level of scholarly culture rather than of the individual investigator. The positivist framework and the phenomenological-hermeneutic framework, which the paper has treated as symmetry-broken phases of the study of flourishing, are not merely options available to any investigator but traditions institutionalised in different scholarly cultures, the one measuring what can be measured and the other interpreting what is meant. The recognition has a consequence for the paper's method. The polyphonic refusal to subordinate one framework to another (§2.2.2) is, read in this light, a refusal to subordinate one scholarly culture's method to another's, and the operational concession, which admits the structured measure while denying it the status of the real, is a way of drawing on the positivist tradition's instruments without adopting its claim that what those instruments measure exhausts what flourishing is. The paper's stance toward the methodological divide is the stance the cultural variation recommends: that the explanatory and the interpretive methods are partial determinations of the study of a flourishing that neither exhausts, and that a foundational treatment must draw on both without resolving their difference by the victory of one.

2.15.4 The cross-cultural variation in the practices of marriage and family

A third variation concerns the practices of marriage and family through which a shared life is cultivated, and it is the variation most directly pertinent to a praxis of intimate flourishing. The conception of what a marriage is, what a family is, and what the parties owe one another varies across cultures along several axes, of which three are salient.

The first axis concerns the meaning and basis of marriage. A long sociological account traces, in the Euro-American context, a transition from the institutional marriage, founded on social obligation and the fulfilment of prescribed roles, through the companionate marriage of the mid-twentieth century, founded on the personal ties of affection and companionship, to the individualised marriage of the present, founded on personal choice and the self-development of the partners (Cherlin 2004). The transition is held to have weakened the social norms that once defined the partners' behaviour, a process termed the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, though its extent varies by social class and the institution retains, especially among the more educated, a central place (Cherlin 2020). The individualised marriage, in which the partners actively select one another, negotiate their commitment, and pursue self-development within the relation, is the form the European sociology of intimacy has described as the normal chaos of love and the transformation of intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992).

The second axis concerns the relation of the couple to the wider family. In the more individualist Euro-American contexts, the married couple tends to be the primary unit, relatively detached from the extended family; in the more collectivist East and South-east Asian contexts, the couple is embedded in an extended family to which it owes ongoing obligations, and the marriage is as much a relation between families as between individuals. The obligation of adult children to their parents, filial piety, is a central organising norm of the East Asian family, and recent work distinguishes a reciprocal filial piety, founded on affection and a lasting positive bond, from an authoritarian filial piety, founded on obedience to social obligation, the former proving more nearly universal across cultures and the latter more culturally specific (Yeh et al. 2013). The intergenerational solidarity of families, the structure of obligation and support across generations, is itself a subject of formal comparative study (Bengtson and Roberts 1991), and the autonomy-relatedness relation, on which the independent and interdependent construals divide, has

been argued to admit a synthesis in which autonomy and relatedness are not opposed but jointly developed, a model of particular relevance to families in modernising societies (Kağıtçıbaşı 2005).

The third axis concerns the direction and pace of change. The family systems of East Asia have been described as at a crossroads, meeting Western individualism, modernity, and changing gender roles against a background of persisting traditional obligation, so that the contemporary East Asian family combines elements of the interdependent and the independent models in a configuration unlike either (Ji 2015). The variation is therefore not static, a fixed map of cultural difference, but dynamic, a set of trajectories of change that differ in direction and pace across cultures. These variations are summarised in Table 2.5.

2.15.5 The cultural variation across the moments of the cycle

The variations surveyed above are not external to the lifecycle but enter at each of its moments, and the foundational value of the account is increased by tracing how each moment is culturally inflected. The lifecycle furnishes a structure within which the cultural variation can be organised, and the organisation shows the variation to be systematic rather than diffuse.

At the moment of *cognition*, the cultural variation is the variation in what flourishing is taken to consist in. The independent construal cognises the flourishing of a shared life as the mutual support of two self-developing individuals; the interdependent construal cognises it as the achievement of relational harmony and the fulfilment of relational obligation; and the conception of this series, the just unfolding of each within a returning cycle, cognises it as a structure of which both are partial. The cultural variation at this moment is a variation in the normative specification of §2.8.5, and a foundational treatment must hold that the specification, though it aims at a structure, is realised in culturally specific forms.

At the moment of *practice*, the cultural variation is the variation in the habits, household forms, and family obligations through which a shared life is cultivated. The individualised marriage is practised through the negotiation of commitment and the mutual support of self-development; the interdependent family is practised through the fulfilment of fil-

ial and relational obligation and the maintenance of harmony; and the family manner cultivated, the *habitus* of §2.9.1, differs accordingly, the one forming dispositions of autonomous partnership, the other dispositions of relational embeddedness. The cultivation-not-legislation constraint of §2.9.2 takes a culturally specific form: what counts as the legislation of a habit, and what as its cultivation, depends on the cultural understanding of the family's authority, so that a practice that is cultivation in one cultural context may be experienced as legislation in another.

At the moment of *evaluation*, the cultural variation is the variation in the standards by which a shared life is judged to be going well, and it bears on the measurement of §2.10. The instruments surveyed there were developed largely within the independent, Euro-American construal, and they measure largely what that construal counts as flourishing, the individual's satisfaction and self-development; applied across cultures, they may systematically mismeasure the flourishing of interdependent shared lives, registering as deficient a relational harmony that the interdependent construal counts as flourishing, or registering as flourishing an autonomous self-development that the interdependent construal counts as a failure of relational obligation. The operational concession bears with particular force here: the structured measure is a proxy not only for an unsymbolised value but for a culturally specific construal of that value, and its cross-cultural application requires a caution beyond the one the concession already imposes.

At the moments of *reflection* and *re-cognition*, the cultural variation is the variation in how a shared life revises its sense of itself and transmits what it has learned. The transmission of a family manner across generations, the *habitus* inherited and revised, is more central to the interdependent family, in which the marriage is embedded in a lineage, than to the individualised marriage, in which the couple is relatively detached; and the re-cognition that closes a turn of the cycle is, in the interdependent context, a re-cognition conducted with reference to the extended family and its continuity, where in the individualist context it is conducted more nearly between the partners alone. The holonomy of the cycle, the phase accumulated across its turns, is in the one case the development of a lineage and in the other the development of a partnership, and the difference is a difference in the unit across which the flourishing is reckoned. Table 2.6 summarises the cultural inflection of the moments of the cycle.

2.15.6 The standing of the cross-cultural account

The cross-cultural variation does not refute the structural account but locates it, and the relation between the two requires statement. The account of the lifecycle, of the moments and their dynamics, of the cycle's persistence and phase, and of justice as the internal condition of the good cycle, is offered as a structure, and the cultural variation is the variation in the determinate forms the structure assumes. The independent and interdependent construals are two such forms, two symmetry-broken phases of the cognition and practice of a shared flourishing, and the series' conception, the just unfolding of each within a returning cycle, is offered not as a third culture's construal set beside them but as an attempt to articulate the structure of which the cultural construals are partial determinations. The attempt is itself culturally situated, written from a particular location and formed by particular traditions, and it claims neither a view from nowhere nor a neutrality among cultures, which would be the metalanguage the series denies. It claims only to articulate, from its situation, a structure that the cultural variation instances, and to hold its own articulation open to the correction that the encounter with each cultural form supplies. The justice condition, in particular, is offered across the cultural variation: that the value a party generates return to that party, and that no party be reduced to the sustaining fuel of a relation that returns to it nothing, is a condition a shared life may fail in any culture, by the culturally specific means each culture affords, and the skew of the return distribution (§2.10.3) is a proxy for an injustice that the independent and the interdependent family are each, in their own forms, capable of.

2.16. The Foundational Role of the Paper in the Series

This paper is the programmatic and foundational text of the part of the series concerned with the praxis of flourishing, and the present section makes that role explicit, since a foundation is of use only if what it founds is stated. The section sets out the instruments the paper supplies to the subsequent papers, the questions it leaves open for them, and the interfaces at which they will connect to it. It is written for the reader of the series as a whole, and it may be passed over by the reader of this paper alone, for whom the preceding sections are complete in themselves.

2.16.1 The instruments the paper supplies

The paper supplies to the subsequent papers a set of instruments, each developed here in its general form and available there for application to particular cases.

The first is the *lifecycle of a shared flourishing* (§2.6): the articulation of a shared life into the moments of cognition, practice, evaluation, reflection, and re-cognition, the thesis that the cycle is a self-sustaining movement whose persistence conditions the relation's existence, and the dynamical vocabulary of persistence, phase, and bifurcation in which the cycle's regimes are described. A subsequent paper concerned with any particular practice of a shared life may locate that practice within the cycle, asking at which moment it falls and how it bears on the cycle's persistence and phase.

The second is the *operational concession* (§2.2.3): the methodological licence to adopt, where a practice must assess, a structured proxy for a value that is not symbolised, in the explicit awareness that the proxy is not the value. Every subsequent paper that assesses anything inherits this concession, and inherits with it the discipline of marking what is proxy and what is real, so that the series' results are read throughout as operationally warranted and not as measurements of the unsymbolised value.

The third is the *skew of the return distribution* (§2.10.3): the thesis that the injustice of a relation's value cycle has a statistical signature in the skewness of the distribution of returned value relative to a coupling-based baseline, and the associated apparatus of expected recyclability, coupling-based baseline, and the branching-process model of return. A subsequent paper concerned with the justice of any particular cycle of value, intimate or economic, may bring this measure to bear, asking whether the cycle returns to its generators or consigns one of them to the low-return tail.

The fourth is the *distinction between the genuine and the forged cycle* (§2.11.1, §2.13.6): the thesis that a cycle may persist and present a high aggregate satisfaction while being, in its phase and its distribution, a catastrophic cycle wearing the appearance of a flourishing spiral, and that the orthogonal measures of skew and foreclosure distinguish the two. A subsequent paper concerned with any cycle that presents itself as good may apply this test, asking whether the appearance is borne out by the distribution beneath it.

The fifth is the *cognitive and computational basis of appraisal* (§2.5): the account of appraisal as continuous inference upon a partially observable state, conducted in unsymbolised value, with its decision-theoretic and free-energy formalisations. A subsequent paper concerned with how a relation registers its own state, or with how a practice is sustained or fails, may draw on this basis.

2.16.2 The questions the paper leaves open

The paper leaves open, for the subsequent papers and for other work, a set of questions it has posed without resolving. The branching-process model of return (§2.10.3) is advanced in its form and not validated; the assignment of value to the acts of a shared life, on which any estimation of return depends, is identified as a substantial empirical problem and not solved; the formalisation of the lifecycle as a dynamical system is offered as a structural analogy under the standing qualification that the system's own law is reconfigured by what it generates; and the proxies for the unfolding of each party (§2.10.5) are acknowledged to reach least adequately the value that lies nearest the unsymbolised. These open questions are the paper's bequest to the work that follows, and their statement is part of the foundation, since a foundation that concealed its incompleteness would be the false ground the series has throughout refused.

2.16.3 The interface to the study of particular cycles

The subsequent papers of this part of the series apply the instruments to particular cycles of value, and the present paper prepares their interface. A study of a particular cycle, on the apparatus developed here, proceeds by identifying the cycle's generators and their coupling, the value generated and its circulation, the distribution of return and its skew, and the cycle's persistence and phase; and it asks, of the cycle, whether it is a flourishing spiral, a catastrophic cycle, or a movement toward extinction, and whether its appearance of good is genuine or forged.

One such study is anticipated closely enough to be named. A consumption cycle, in which a good is desired, acquired, and enjoyed, and the desire renewed, may present every appearance of a flourishing cycle: the parties are satisfied, the cycle persists, and the satisfaction is real. The apparatus developed here permits the question whether such

a cycle is a genuine flourishing spiral or a forged one, by directing attention past the satisfaction of the parties to the distribution of return across the whole network that sustains the cycle, including those whose labour produces the good consumed and who may be consigned, unseen by the satisfied parties, to the low-return tail. The skew of the return distribution, taken across the whole sustaining network and not only across the visible parties, is the instrument by which a consumption cycle that is internally satisfying may be found to be externally extractive, its internal holonomy positive and its full holonomy, reckoned across all whom it draws upon, negative. The study of such a cycle, as a case in which the genuine and the forged are distinguished by the apparatus of this paper, is the work of a subsequent paper, for which the present paper is the foundation, and to which it hands the instruments here developed.

2.17. Limitations, Objections, and Replies

A foundational treatment is strengthened by gathering, and meeting directly, the objections its apparatus invites, rather than leaving them dispersed among the cautions of the several sections. This section states the principal objections to the paper's approach and the replies the paper offers, in the awareness that the replies dissolve some objections and only mitigate others, and that the latter mark the genuine limitations the paper bears.

2.17.1 That the skew criterion misjudges a legitimate division of labour

The first objection holds that the skew of the return distribution will misjudge as exploitation a division of labour that is in fact legitimate. Parties to a shared life may, the objection runs, justly specialise, one bearing more of the sustaining labour and the other more of some other contribution, and a measure that reads asymmetric return as injustice will condemn a specialisation the parties have freely and fairly chosen.

The reply turns on the coupling-based baseline (§2.10.3). The criterion does not read asymmetric contribution as injustice, nor asymmetric return as such; it reads as injustice the systematic shortfall of one party's return below the baseline that the coupling and the generation set. A legitimate specialisation, in which one party bears more sustaining labour and is returned to in proportion, through the relation's circulation, to the value that labour generates, produces no skew, since the return tracks the generation; the

normalised return of both parties is near unity, and the distribution is symmetric. The skew arises only when the value a party generates does not return to that party, which is not the mark of specialisation but of extraction. The objection conflates an asymmetric division of tasks, which the criterion does not condemn, with an asymmetric return on a symmetric generation, which it does. The reply, however, concedes a residual difficulty: the baseline itself depends on the assignment of value to contributions (§2.10.4), and a culture or a couple that systematically undervalues the sustaining labour in that assignment will set a baseline that conceals the extraction, reading a genuine shortfall as proportionate. The criterion is only as just as the valuation that feeds it, and the valuation is the contestable step the concession marks.

2.17.2 That modelling a relation as a value network reifies intimacy

The second objection holds that to model a shared life as a network of value generation and return is to reify intimacy, to reduce a relation of love to an economic exchange, and that the reduction falsifies the very thing it claims to illuminate.

The reply distinguishes the model from a metaphysics. The paper does not claim that a relation is a value network, nor that love is exchange; it claims that the network is a structured proxy (§2.2.3), an operational instrument that makes one feature of a relation, the distribution of its returns, assessable, and that this feature, though it is not the relation, is a feature a relation has and one whose maldistribution is an injustice the parties have reason to detect. The value at issue is, throughout, the transversal and largely unsymbolised value of the prior papers (§2.5), not a monetary or exchangeable quantity, and the paper has insisted that the structured proxy does not reach it. The reduction the objection fears is exactly the reduction the operational concession refuses: to mistake the proxy for the relation, the measured return for the love, is the cardinal error the paper has named (§2.11.3), and the paper commits it no more than a cartographer, mapping a country's rivers, claims that the country is its rivers. The model illuminates a feature against the background of a relation it does not claim to exhaust, and the warmth, the meaning, and the unsymbolised texture of the shared life, which the model does not capture, are precisely what the paper's Envoi and its insistence on the matter of the field return to.

2.17.3 That the operational concession immunises the paper against criticism

The third objection holds that the operational concession is too convenient: by declaring in advance that its measures are proxies that do not reach the real value, the paper immunises itself against every criticism, since any objection to a measure can be met by the reply that the measure was never claimed to be more than a proxy. The concession, on this objection, is not a discipline but an evasion.

The reply grants the danger and specifies the discipline that averts it. A concession that licensed any measure whatever, on the ground that all are merely proxies, would indeed be an evasion; the paper's concession does not. It requires of a proxy that it be operationally warranted, that it make some genuine feature assessable, that its results be read as evidence and not as measurement, and that it never be possessed as the truth of the relation (§2.11.3); and it holds the proxy answerable to the basal appraisal it proxies, so that a measure systematically at odds with the parties' considered appraisal is thereby impugned. The concession is, in this respect, a standard the measures must meet and not a blanket exemption: it constrains how a measure may be used, and the constraint is violable, as the cardinal error of possessing the measure as truth shows. The objection would hold against a concession that exempted measures from criticism; it does not hold against one that, as here, specifies the limited use under which alone a measure is admitted and marks the misuse that breaks it.

2.17.4 That to speak of justice in intimacy is a category mistake

The fourth objection holds that justice is a category proper to the public and political sphere, to the distribution of goods among strangers under institutions, and that to import it into intimacy is a category mistake, since intimate relations are governed by love and care, which transcend and even oppose the calculative posture of justice.

The reply is that the opposition between love and justice is itself the ideology under which intimate injustice is concealed, and that the ethics of care, properly understood, requires rather than opposes the justice of care's distribution (§2.3.2). The labour of sustaining a shared life is labour; its systematic extraction from one party is an injustice whether or not the relation is loving, and indeed a loving relation is precisely the site at which such extraction is most effectively concealed, since the language of love supplies

the ideology under which the sustaining labour is figured as freely given and its under-return as natural (§2.10.3). To hold that justice has no place in intimacy is not to protect intimacy from a calculative intrusion but to remove from the exploited party the one vocabulary in which their exploitation could be named. The paper's claim is not that intimacy should be calculative, but that the refusal to assess the justice of an intimate relation's distribution is the condition under which its injustice is sustained, and that a love worthy of the name does not require, and is not damaged by, the justice of its returns. The reply, however, concedes a limit: the assessment of justice is an instrument to be drawn upon when injustice is suspected, not a posture to be maintained continuously, and a relation conducted as a perpetual audit of its returns would have made the measure the truth of the relation, committing the cardinal error in a new form. Justice is the internal condition of the good cycle (§2.13.6), not the continuous activity of the parties within it.

2.17.5 The residual limitations

The replies dissolve the objections that rest on misunderstanding, the conflation of asymmetric return with asymmetric task, the mistaking of the model for a metaphysics, the reading of the concession as exemption, and the opposition of love to justice. They leave standing a set of genuine limitations, which the paper records as its own. The valuation of contributions, on which the whole quantitative apparatus rests, is an operational stipulation that no measurement discharges, and a biased valuation yields a biased assessment (§2.17.1). The network model is unvalidated and its estimation an unsolved empirical problem (§B.2). The dynamical model is a structural analogy under the standing qualification that the relation's law is reconfigured by what it generates. The proxies for the unfolding of each party reach least adequately the value that lies nearest the unsymbolised. And the whole apparatus is offered for the central case of the dyad and its coupled network, with the cross-cultural variation (§2.15) locating but not exhausting the forms the apparatus must take across the range of human shared lives. These are the limitations a foundational treatment bequeaths to the work it founds, and their statement is not a weakening of the foundation but a part of it, since a foundation that concealed its limits would be the false ground the series has throughout refused.

2.18. Conclusions at the Boundaries of the Frameworks

The paper terminates as the prior papers of the series have, not in a single conclusion that would gather the frameworks into a possessed whole, but in plural conclusions, each stated from within a framework to the boundary of what that framework establishes. The plurality is required by the method: a flourishing that no single framework possesses cannot be concluded in the terms of any one, and the dialogue among the frameworks, each speaking to its boundary, is the only form a conclusion may take without installing one framework as the metalanguage the series denies.

2.18.1 From positivism

Positivism establishes that flourishing has measurable indicators, that these can be brought to validated and comparable instruments, and that the structured measures so obtained are a public and accumulable gain over private appraisal. It establishes the recyclability, the skew of return, and the rates of accomplished and foreclosed undertaking as structured proxies that make visible what aggregate satisfaction conceals. Positivism does not establish that its measures reach the value they proxy, which is unsymbolised and beyond their structuring; it cannot distinguish, from a satisfaction score alone, a flourishing spiral from a forged one; and it reaches its boundary at the point where the structured proxy must be read against the value it does not contain, which it consigns to reflection and to the basal appraisal it cannot replace.

2.18.2 From evidentialism

Evidentialism establishes that belief about flourishing, and the practice founded on it, ought to be proportioned to evidence and revised as evidence revises, and that this proportioning operates not only in the explicit weighing of studies but in the continuous belief updating that underlies all appraisal. It establishes the supported practices a cultivation may draw upon, and the form of the hypothesis test by which the justice of a value cycle might be assessed. Evidentialism does not establish what the singular shared life requires beyond the average its evidence reports, and it is mute where the value at issue cannot be brought to evidence at all; it reaches its boundary at the unsymbolised appraisal that is its own deep form and yet exceeds any evidence it can marshal.

2.18.3 From normative theory

Normative theory establishes that flourishing is the substantive freedom of each party to unfold what that party has reason to value, that this unfolding is plural and not aggregate, and that a just flourishing requires the return of value to its generators and the foreclosure of no party's unfolding. It establishes the normative specification against which the paper's evaluation is conducted. Normative theory does not establish that its specification is realised in a given life, which is a matter of practice and assessment under actual conditions; and it does not reach the lived and unsymbolised meaning in which the specification has its concrete sense for a particular couple, which it consigns to the phenomenological.

2.18.4 From virtue ethics

Virtue ethics establishes that flourishing is activity in accordance with cultivated excellence, that such excellence is formed by habituation in the concrete fabric of a shared life, and that the cultivation of disposition, and not the legislation of it, is the just form of this formation. It establishes the connection between the cognition of flourishing and its practice that the other frameworks leave implicit. Virtue ethics does not establish a procedure for the formation of the right dispositions, since a procedure applied from outside the joint practice would be the legislation it forbids; it reaches its boundary at the point where the cultivation of a shared disposition must proceed without a rule, in the unguaranteeable practice the prior paper described.

2.18.5 From phenomenology

Phenomenology establishes that flourishing is lived and interpreted before it is measured, that its givenness in the felt quality and the apprehended meaning of a shared life is the matter to which every measure is answerable, and that the basal appraisal in which a relation is continuously evaluated is conducted in this lived and unsymbolised register. It establishes the limit against which the structured measures are to be read. Phenomenology does not establish anything public, comparable, or accumulable, since what it describes resists exactly the structuring that would make it so; it reaches its boundary at the point where the lived meaning of a shared life must be communicated, assessed, or

accumulated, which it consigns to the structured proxies it cannot itself supply.

2.18.6 From the cognitive and dynamical account

The cognitive and dynamical account establishes that appraisal is, at its basis, a continuous inference upon a partially observable state, conducted in unsymbolised value; that the relation is maintained by the persistence of this appraisal and the practice taken upon it, so that the cessation of the cycle is the relation's extinction; and that the cycle's regime is fixed by its persistence and the sign of its phase, with justice as the internal condition of a positive phase for all parties. It establishes the lifecycle as a real cycle and the three regimes as its possible fates. The account does not establish a fixed model of the cycle, since the value function of the relational decision process is itself revised by the cycle, in the manner the prior paper analysed as the absence of a fixed meta-value-grammar; it reaches its boundary at the reflexive reconfiguration that no fixed model captures, and consigns the matter, as the prior paper did, to the open question of a formalism whose own ground is not fixed.

2.18.7 The absence of a single conclusion

These conclusions do not sum. Each framework, developed to its boundary, establishes what it establishes and consigns to another what it cannot reach: positivism consigns the unsymbolised remainder to phenomenology and reflection, normative theory consigns the lived meaning to phenomenology and the realisation to practice, virtue ethics consigns the formation without a rule to the unguaranteeable practice, phenomenology consigns the public and comparable to the structured proxy, and the dynamical account consigns the reflexive remainder to the open formal question. The flourishing of a shared life is the object none of them possesses and all of them partially determine, and the operational concession governs the whole: where the paper assessed, it assessed a structured proxy for a value it did not reach, and it bore the incompleteness rather than concealing it.

The absence of a single conclusion as the adequate conclusion. There is no single conclusion that gathers the frameworks into a possessed account of flourishing, not for

want of one but because flourishing is not possessed by any framework and is in production across them. The plural conclusions are partial and mutually irreducible of necessity, and their dialogue, each framework speaking to its boundary and consigning what it cannot reach, is itself the polyphonic and unconcluded form that a just eudaimonia, cultivated and not constructed, assessed in proxy and not possessed, sustained as an open spiral and not secured as a state, requires of any account faithful to it. That the paper does not conclude in a single account is its fidelity to an object that is cultivated, processual, and unguaranteeable: the account, like the flourishing it treats, is sustained as an open movement and not secured as a possessed result.

The flourishing of a shared life is, in the end, neither measured nor possessed but lived, cultivated, and continually reappraised, in a cycle whose persistence is its life, whose phase is its rising or its decline, and whose justice is the condition of its rising for both. The frameworks illuminate it severally and from their boundaries; the cycle turns; and the good of a shared life is generated, where it is generated, in the turning, and not in any account of it, this one included.

Envoi

This paper has treated a shared flourishing as a cycle to be sustained, a fabric to be tended, and a turning to be appraised in a value that no measure reaches. It has spoken of recyclability and skew, of belief and bifurcation, of habit and household, because a practice requires what is operable, and it has conceded throughout that these are proxies for a good that is lived before it is assessed and that exceeds every assessment of it.

What the assessments leave out is the whole of the matter, and it returns at the close as it returned in the prior paper: a meal shared across years that no satisfaction scale records the worth of, a way of keeping a room that is the form a love has taken, a silence between two people that is full rather than empty and that no instrument can read. These are the matter of the field, and they are the observations through which, beneath all reflection, each appraises continually how things stand between them. The cycle of a shared life

turns in them, and turns well when it turns justly, returning to each what each has given, foreclosing the unfolding of neither, and rising, turn upon turn, into more than the two were.

A good so cultivated is not secured and then possessed. It is generated in the turning, and a relation flourishes by continuing to turn, justly, and ceases when the turning ceases. There is no state of it to be reached and kept; there is only the tending, the appraising, the reflecting, and the turning again, across the seasons of a shared life, from its beginning, through whatever it becomes, into its later years.

*For the girl of the forest and the mountains,
that our turning, turned together, may rise;
that what returns to her be no less than she gives;
and that the good of our shared life be generated, and generated again,
in every turning of its years.*

愿我如星君如月，夜夜流光相皎洁。

Acknowledgements

This paper, on the flourishing of a shared life, was written for the one with whom the author hopes to share it. To her, the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves to travel and to be among wild and growing things, and who is pure of heart, and lovely, and kind, this work is dedicated, as the prior papers of the series have been. It is a paper about how two people might flourish together, justly and across the long course of a shared life, and it was written in the wish that the life the author hopes to share with her may be such a flourishing: that their cycle, turned together, may rise rather than merely repeat or decline; that what each gives the other may return to them both; and that the good of their shared life may be generated, and generated again, in every turning of its years. The theory is offered to others for whatever it is worth to them; the wish that animates it is for her, and for the happiness, lasting and lifelong, that the author hopes they will make together.

愿得一心人，白头不相离；岁岁长相见，年年共此时。

This is a working draft, circulated for discussion and not for citation. Its principal constructive proposals, the lifecycle as a real cycle whose persistence conditions the relation, the operational concession, and the skewness of the return distribution as a structured proxy for injustice, are advanced under the operational concession the paper states, as instruments warranted by their use and not as measurements of the value they serve.

A. Notation and Key Concepts

Because the paper introduces a number of constructs and, in its formal appendix, a number of symbols, this section gathers them for reference. The first table lists the principal symbols of the formal appendix; the second gathers the key concepts the paper introduces, with the section in which each is developed.

B. Formal Sketches

This appendix records, in compressed form, the formal apparatus to which the main text points. The sketches are not validated models, and they are offered under the operational concession that governs the paper: each is a structured proxy whose use is operational, and none reaches the unsymbolised value it proxies. Three cautions, stated at the close, apply to all of them.

B.1 Appraisal as inference on a partially observable process

The basal appraisal of §2.5 is formalised as a partially observable Markov decision process whose reward function is non-stationary, and the non-stationarity is shown to be the decision-theoretic form of the absence of a fixed meta-value-grammar.

The process. Let $s \in S$ be the hidden state of the relation, not directly observable; let $o \in O$ be the observation, the lived sensory and habitual fabric, related to the state by an observation model $P(o \mid s)$; let $a \in A$ be the action, the practice. The state evolves by a transition model $P(s' \mid s, a)$. The agent does not access s but maintains a belief $b \in \Delta(S)$, a distribution over states, and updates it on each observation by the Bayes filter

$$b'(s') = \frac{P(o \mid s') \sum_s P(s' \mid s, a) b(s)}{\sum_{s'} P(o \mid s') \sum_s P(s' \mid s, a) b(s)},$$

choosing actions on the belief b rather than on the inaccessible s . The belief is the formal correlate of the parties' superposed, non-definite sense of the relation's state (§2.5.2), and its updating is the basal evaluation that runs through every moment of the cycle (§2.6.1).

The non-stationary reward, and the absence of a meta-grammar. A standard process maximises the expected discounted sum of a fixed reward $R(s, a)$, representing the good to be secured. The relational process has no fixed reward: what the parties are to secure, the good of the relation, is itself reconceived at the moment of re-cognition (§2.12). Formally, the reward is indexed by the turn t of the cycle, $R_t(s, a)$, and the re-cognition that closes turn t produces the reward R_{t+1} of the next turn as a functional of the turn's trajectory,

$$R_{t+1} = \Phi(R_t, \tau_t),$$

where τ_t is the trajectory of beliefs, actions, and observations over turn t and Φ is the re-cognition operator. The process thus optimises an objective that its own running rewrites. There is no fixed terminal reward toward which the whole converges, and no meta-reward R^* governing the sequence $\{R_t\}$ from outside, since Φ is itself reconfigured by the trajectories it processes; this is the decision-theoretic form of the thesis that there is no fixed meta-value-grammar (§2.5.2), the value function occupying the place that the prior paper kept empty.

Active inference and the imperative to keep inferring. On the free-energy formalisation (§2.5.3), the agent does not maximise reward but minimises variational free energy, an upper bound on the surprise of its observations. Writing $q(s)$ for the agent's recognition density over states and $p(o, s)$ for its generative model, the free energy is

$$F = \mathbb{E}_{q(s)}[\log q(s) - \log p(o, s)] = \underbrace{D_{\text{KL}}(q(s) \parallel p(s \mid o))}_{\text{inference gap}} - \log p(o),$$

minimised over q by perception, which closes the inference gap, and over a , through $p(o)$, by action, which makes observations conform to expectation. The agent maintains itself, holds itself away from the dispersed states that would dissolve it, exactly by continuing to minimise F , that is, by continuing to infer and to act. The cessation of this activity is, formally, the agent's ceasing to resist the growth of free energy, equivalently the dispersion of its states toward the high-entropy distribution that is its dissolution. Transposed to the relation, the continued minimisation of free energy is the continued appraisal and practice by which the relation maintains itself (§2.6.2), and its cessation is the decay toward the terminal rest the paper names extinction (§2.13.4). The imperative to keep

inferring is, on this formalisation, the imperative to keep the relation in existence, written as the minimisation of a free-energy functional.

B.2 The justice of the value cycle: a spectral formalisation

The assessment of justice in §2.10.3 is formalised here through the propagation of value on the relational network and the spectral analysis of the propagation operator, in a manner that connects the present account to the branching-process formalisation of generative recursion developed elsewhere in the author’s work.

The network and the propagation operator. Let the relation be represented by a finite directed weighted graph on the set of generators $N = \{1, \dots, n\}$, the parties and the coupled others. The coupling is encoded in a non-negative matrix $W = (w_{ij})_{i,j \in N}$, where $w_{ij} \geq 0$ is the fraction of value present at node j that propagates, in one step of circulation, to node i . The column sums satisfy $\sum_i w_{ij} \leq 1$ for every j , the deficit $1 - \sum_i w_{ij}$ being the fraction of value at j that leaves the network at that step, lost to neither party. A unit of value generated at node j and circulating for one step yields the vector $W e_j$, where e_j is the j th standard basis vector; circulating for k steps yields $W^k e_j$. Because W is sub-stochastic and non-negative, its spectral radius satisfies $\rho(W) \leq 1$, and when value leaves the network at some node the inequality is strict, $\rho(W) < 1$, which guarantees that the Neumann series below converges.

Total return and recyclability. The total value that returns to each generator, accumulated over all steps of circulation, is given by the resolvent

$$R = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} W^k = (I - W)^{-1} - I,$$

which converges precisely when $\rho(W) < 1$. The entry R_{ij} is the total value returning to i from a unit generated at j , and the diagonal entry R_{ii} is the total value returning to the generator i itself, the quantity §2.10.3 called recyclability. The spectral radius $\rho(W)$ is the formal correlate of the threshold of §2.10.3: as $\rho(W) \rightarrow 1$, the resolvent diverges and the cycle of value sustains and amplifies itself, while a small $\rho(W)$ corresponds to a cycle in which value is rapidly lost, winding down toward the extinction of §2.13.4. The

persistence of the cycle is thus governed by the leading eigenvalue of the propagation operator.

The Perron vector and the coupling-based baseline. When W is irreducible, the Perron–Frobenius theorem guarantees a unique positive eigenvalue $\rho(W)$ of largest modulus, with a positive right eigenvector v , the Perron vector, satisfying $Wv = \rho(W)v$. The Perron vector gives the stationary relative distribution of value across the network under repeated circulation: it is the profile of value-holding the network tends toward, independent of where value is generated. The Perron vector furnishes the coupling-based baseline of §2.10.3: the baseline expected return $\hat{r}_i$ to generator i is the return that the coupling structure alone, through its stationary profile v_i , would assign to i . A relation whose returns track the Perron vector is one whose distribution of value is governed by the coupling and by nothing else; departures from it are the object of the justice assessment.

Concentration and the spectral signature of domination. The shape of the Perron vector is itself a structural datum. A Perron vector close to uniform describes a network in which value circulates broadly and returns are distributed across the generators; a Perron vector concentrated on one node describes a network in which value accumulates at that node under circulation, the structural form of a relation organised around the enrichment of one party. The concentration of the Perron vector, measured for instance by its participation ratio $(\sum_i v_i)^2 / \sum_i v_i^2$ normalised by n , is accordingly a spectral signature of the network’s tendency toward domination, prior to and independent of the actual returns: a relation may be structurally disposed toward the concentration of value by its coupling alone, and the Perron vector reveals this disposition. This is the point of contact with the analysis of background-independence and concentrated control developed in the author’s formal work, where the concentration of the Perron vector distinguishes a democratic from a dominated generative structure.

The skew statistic and its test. Let r_i be the actual return to generator i over the period of assessment, estimated from the value circulating in the relation, and let $\hat{r}_i = c v_i$ be the coupling-based baseline, c a normalising constant. Define the normalised return $\theta_i = r_i / \hat{r}_i$, so that $\theta_i = 1$ is the return the coupling alone would assign. The justice of the cycle is assessed through the distribution of $\{\theta_i\}_{i \in N}$, and specifically through its sample

skewness

$$g = \frac{\frac{1}{n} \sum_i (\theta_i - \bar{\theta})^3}{\left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_i (\theta_i - \bar{\theta})^2 \right)^{3/2}}.$$

The null hypothesis of an unbiased cycle is that the θ_i are exchangeable about their mean, so that the population skewness is zero and no generator is systematically favoured or disfavoured beyond the coupling. The alternative is a significant negative skew, $g < 0$ with the lower tail occupied by a distinguished generator, characteristically the bearer of the sustaining labour. Under the null, the sampling distribution of g may be obtained by permutation, since exchangeability makes all assignments of the observed returns to the generators equally likely; the test rejects when the observed g falls below the permutation quantile. The power of the test increases with n , with the magnitude of the under-return, and with the precision of the estimated returns, and is limited in the intimate case by the smallness of n , which is why the measure is most informative when the coupled network, including family and the wider sustaining chain, is taken into account rather than the dyad alone.

Standing of the formalisation. The formalisation requires assumptions not discharged here: that the propagation is adequately linear and one-step Markov, so that W and its powers capture the circulation; that W is estimable, which requires the assignment of value to acts and its tracing through the network, the substantial empirical problem of §2.10.3; and that W is approximately stationary over the period of assessment. Under these assumptions the justice of a relation's value cycle is, in principle, a testable hypothesis about the skewness of normalised return against a Perron-vector baseline, and the persistence of the cycle is governed by the spectral radius of the propagation operator. The formalisation is offered as the form such an assessment would take, under the operational concession, and not as a validated instrument.

B.3 The three regimes: a minimal dynamical model

The regimes of §2.13 are formalised here in a minimal dynamical model, offered as a structural analogy under the standing qualification (§2.4) that the law of a relation is itself reconfigured by what it generates, so that no fixed system captures it in full.

State variables and dynamics. Let the state of the relation be summarised by a scalar $x \geq 0$, the intensity of the relation's living activity, the rate at which value is generated, circulated, and returned. Let the dynamics be

$$\dot{x} = x(r(x) - \mu),$$

where $r(x)$ is the per-unit regeneration of activity, the recyclability of §2.10.3 expressed as a rate, and $\mu > 0$ is the rate of loss, the attrition the relation suffers absent regeneration. The factor x encodes that activity regenerates only where activity is present, so that $x = 0$, the cessation of all relational activity, is always a fixed point.

Fixed points and the existence of the living regimes. The fixed points are $x = 0$ and any $x^* > 0$ with $r(x^*) = \mu$. Suppose r is increasing then saturating, $r(0) = r_0$ and $r(x) \rightarrow r_\infty$ as $x \rightarrow \infty$, with $r_0 < r_\infty$, capturing that a relation with more living activity regenerates value more readily, up to saturation. Then:

- if $r_\infty < \mu$, the only fixed point is $x = 0$, which is stable: every relation decays to extinction, since loss exceeds regeneration at every level of activity;
- if $r_0 < \mu < r_\infty$, there is an interior fixed point $x^* > 0$; the linearisation $\partial_x[x(r(x) - \mu)]|_{x^*} = x^*r'(x^*) > 0$ shows x^* is unstable and $x = 0$ stable when r is increasing through μ from below, giving a threshold (an Allee-type effect): relations beginning above x^* sustain themselves and those below it decay to extinction;
- if $r_0 > \mu$, the fixed point $x = 0$ is unstable and an interior stable x^* exists at the saturating branch: the relation sustains a living regime from any positive start.

The persistence of the cycle (§2.6.2) is thus the condition $r_0 > \mu$ or a start above the threshold x^* ; its failure is the decay to the fixed point $x = 0$, which is extinction (§2.13.4).

Phase, and the flourishing versus catastrophic regimes. Persistence fixes whether the relation lives; a second variable fixes the phase it accumulates. Let φ be the per-turn holonomy, reckoned per party, and in the two-party case let φ_A, φ_B be the phases accruing to A and B . These are governed by the distribution of return: writing σ for the skew

of the return distribution (§2.10.3), with $\sigma = 0$ symmetric and $\sigma < 0$ skewed against B ,

$$\varphi_A = \alpha(x^*)(1 + \kappa\sigma), \quad \varphi_B = \alpha(x^*)(1 - \kappa\sigma),$$

for positive constants α, κ , so that a symmetric return ($\sigma = 0$) gives both parties the same positive phase, while a skew against B ($\sigma < 0$) raises φ_A and lowers φ_B . The flourishing spiral (§2.13.2) is the persisting regime with $\varphi_A, \varphi_B > 0$; the catastrophic cycle (§2.13.3) is the persisting regime with some $\varphi_i < 0$, which by the above occurs when the skew is severe enough that $\kappa|\sigma| > 1$, driving φ_B negative while the relation persists and φ_A , and hence a satisfaction aggregate weighted toward A , remains positive. This is the formal form of the central claim (§2.13.6): a positive phase for all parties requires $\kappa|\sigma| < 1$, that is, a return not severely skewed, so that justice (small σ) is the internal condition of the flourishing spiral.

Bifurcation. The passage between regimes is a bifurcation in the parameters (μ, σ) . As μ rises past r_∞ , or as a relation near the threshold x^* is perturbed below it, the living regime loses stability and the relation decays to extinction: this is a saddle-node bifurcation in x , the interior fixed point and the basin of the living regime annihilating as the parameter crosses its critical value, which is the dynamical form of the punctuated collapse the main text describes (§2.13.5). As σ falls past the critical skew $\sigma_c = -1/\kappa$, the phase φ_B crosses zero and the relation passes, while persisting, from the flourishing to the catastrophic regime: this is a transcritical crossing in the phase variable, the relation's regime changing in kind at a threshold of skew reached, often, by the gradual compounding of a slight initial asymmetry, exactly as in the longitudinal case of §2.14. The two bifurcations, in μ and in σ , are the two ways a relation changes regime: the failure of persistence and the reversal of phase, the first governing the passage to extinction and the second the passage between the flourishing and the catastrophic cycle.

B.4 Three cautions

Three cautions apply to all of the foregoing. First, the structured quantities, the belief, the return distribution, the holonomy, are proxies for a value that is unsymbolised and that they do not reach; their use is operational, and their results are evidence and not measurement. Second, each model depends on assumptions not discharged here, the

observation and transition models of the decision process, the propagation probabilities of the branching process, the parameters of the dynamical system; the sketches indicate the form a model would take and do not supply a validated one. Third, the unfolding of each party's own dynamics, which lies nearest the unsymbolised value, is the quantity these models least adequately capture, and its proxies, the rates of accomplished and foreclosed undertaking, are the most provisional of the structured quantities the paper employs. The formal apparatus is offered for what it makes visible, under these cautions, and not as a representation of the value it serves.

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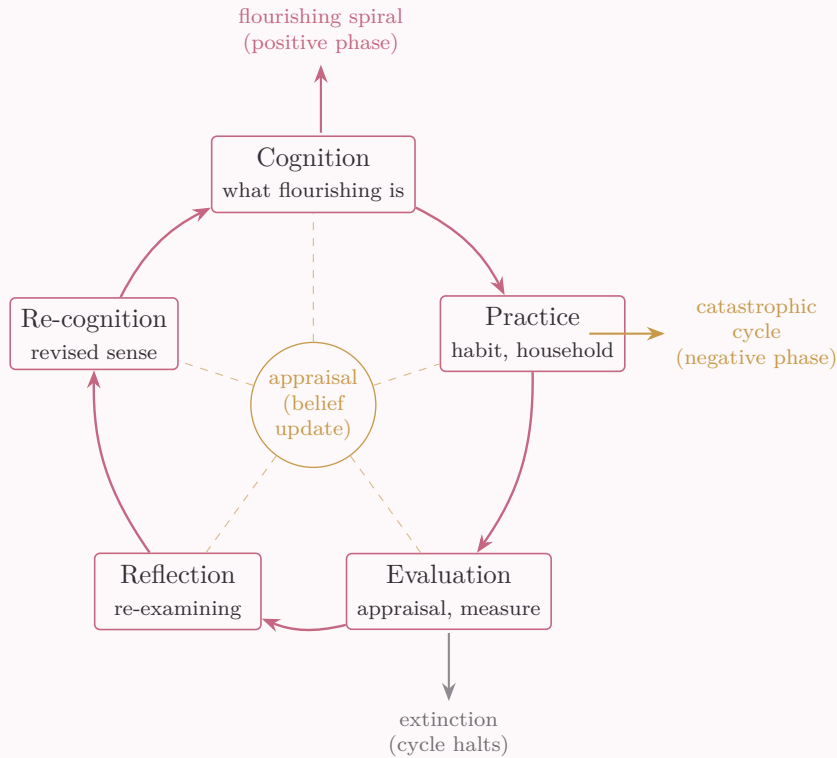


Figure 2.1: The lifecycle of a shared flourishing as a cycle. The five moments (cognition, practice, evaluation, reflection, re-cognition) interpenetrate and feed back rather than forming a linear sequence. Evaluation, as the continuous and largely unconscious updating of a belief about the state of the relation, runs through every moment (the inner spokes) before it is ever an explicit measurement. The persistence of the cycle is the condition of the relation’s survival; the sign of the phase it accumulates over a turn distinguishes the flourishing spiral from the catastrophic cycle, and the halting of the cycle is extinction.

Table 2.3: Principal instruments for the quantitative measurement of well-being, quality of life, and relationship quality.

Instrument	Tradition	What it measures	Source
Satisfaction with Life Scale	Hedonic SWB	Cognitive life satisfaction; 5 items, 7-point	Diener et al. (1985)
PANAS	Hedonic SWB	Positive and negative affect; 20 items	Watson et al. (1988)
Ryff Scales (PWB)	Eudaimonic	Six dimensions of positive functioning; 18–84 items	Ryff (1989) and Ryff and Keyes (1995)
Self-determination measures	Eudaimonic	Autonomy, competence, relatedness need-satisfaction	Ryan and Deci (2000)
PERMA	Eudaimonic	Positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment	Seligman (2011)
WHOQOL	Quality of life	Physical, psychological, social, environmental domains	WHOQOL Group (1998)
Dyadic Adjustment Scale	Relationship	Consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, affection; 32 items	Spanier (1976)
Relationship Assessment Scale	Relationship	Global relationship satisfaction; 7 items, unidimensional	Hendrick (1988)
World Happiness Report	Macro/national	Single life-evaluation (Cantril ladder); national averages	Wellbeing Research Centre (2026)
OECD Better Life Index	Macro/national	Eleven dimensions, 24 indicators, user-weighted	OECD (2020)
Global Flourishing Study	Eudaimonic/macro	Six domains incl. character, meaning, relationships; longitudinal	VanderWeele, Johnson, et al. (2025)

Table 2.4: The instruments located within the framework of the paper: the component of a just eudaimonia each proxies, the moment of the cycle at which each is drawn upon, and whether it registers the condition of justice.

Family	Component of a just eudaimonia proxied	Cycle moment	Registers justice?
Hedonic SWB	Felt quality of life, at the aggregate or mean	Evaluation	No; mean conceals skew
Eudaimonic	Unfolding of each party's potentials, in isolation	Cognition, evaluation	Partially; misses foreclosure by the other
Relationship quality	Each party's satisfaction with the relation	Evaluation, reflection	No; aggregate conceals maldistribution
Quality of life	Objective conditions of a life	Practice, evaluation	No; not addressed to return
Macro/national	Population-level well-being	(Not intra-relational)	No; not addressed to a particular relation
Skew of return <i>(this paper)</i>	Justice: return to each relative to coupling	Evaluation, reflection	Yes; this is its object

Table 2.5: Axes of cross-cultural variation in the conception and practice of marriage and family.

Axis	Individualist pole (Euro-American)	Interdependent pole (East Asian)	Sources
Basis of marriage	Individualised: personal choice, self-development; deinstitutionalised	Institutional and relational: obligation, family alliance, prescribed roles	Cherlin (2004) and Cherlin (2020)
Couple and wider family	Couple as primary unit, detached from extended family	Couple embedded in extended family with ongoing obligation	Ji (2015) and Bengtson and Roberts (1991)
Intergenerational norm	Weak filial obligation; support voluntary	Filial piety, reciprocal and authoritarian; support obligatory	Yeh et al. (2013) and Kağıtçıbaşı (2005)
Conception of intimacy	Transformation of intimacy; the normal chaos of love	Harmony, ordinariness, interdependent happiness	Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), and Hitokoto and Uchida (2015)

Table 2.6: The cultural inflection of the moments of the lifecycle: how each moment differs under the independent and interdependent construals.

Moment	Independent construal	Interdependent construal
Cognition	Flourishing as mutual support of two self-developing individuals	Flourishing as relational harmony and fulfilment of obligation
Practice	Negotiation of commitment; cultivation of autonomous partnership	Fulfilment of filial and relational obligation; embeddedness
Evaluation	Individual satisfaction and self-development; existing instruments fit	Relational harmony; existing instruments may misregister
Reflection	Conducted between the partners; standard is the partnership	Conducted with reference to the extended family and lineage
Re-cognition	Holonomy as development of a partnership	Holonomy as development of a lineage

Table 2.7: Principal symbols of the formal appendix.

Symbol	Meaning
s, S	Hidden state of the relation, and its space
o, O	Observation (the lived fabric), and its space
a, A	Action (practice), and its space
b	Belief: a distribution over hidden states
$R_t(s, a)$	Reward at turn t ; non-stationary, rewritten at re-cognition
Φ	Re-cognition operator: $R_{t+1} = \Phi(R_t, \tau_t)$
F	Variational free energy
$W = (w_{ij})$	Coupling matrix: fraction of value propagating $j \rightarrow i$
$\rho(W)$	Spectral radius of W ; governs persistence
$R =$ $(I - W)^{-1} - I$	Resolvent: total return matrix; R_{ii} is recyclability
v	Perron vector: stationary value profile; sets the baseline
$r_i, \hat{r}_i$	Actual and coupling-based-baseline return to generator i
$\theta_i = r_i / \hat{r}_i$	Normalised return to generator i
g	Sample skewness of $\{\theta_i\}$: the injustice statistic
x	Intensity of the relation's living activity
$r(x), \mu$	Regeneration rate and loss rate
x^*	Interior fixed point (threshold or living attractor)
φ_A, φ_B	Per-turn holonomy (phase) accruing to each party
σ	Skew of the return distribution; $\sigma_c = -1/\kappa$ is critical

Table 2.8: Key concepts introduced or employed by the paper.

Concept	Statement	Section
Lifecycle as a real cycle	The shared life as a self-sustaining cyclic movement whose persistence conditions the relation's existence	§2.6
Operational concession	The deliberate adoption, where assessment is required, of a structured proxy known not to reach the unsymbolised value	§2.2.3
Basal vs explicit evaluation	Continuous unconscious appraisal (inference on a hidden state) vs deliberate instrumented measurement	§2.5.4
Expected recyclability	The probability that a contribution is met by a regenerating response; proxies the cycle's life	§2.10.3
Coupling-based baseline	The return the coupling structure alone would assign (the Perron-vector profile)	§2.10.3
Skew of return (injustice fingerprint)	The skewness of normalised return: a structured proxy for exploitation, orthogonal to the mean	§2.10.3
Foreclosure of unfolding	The concentration in one party of undertakings abandoned on account of the relation	§2.10.5
Three regimes	Flourishing spiral, catastrophic cycle, extinction, fixed by persistence and phase	§2.13
Justice as internal condition	Justice is the internal condition of the flourishing spiral, not a constraint upon it	§2.13.6
Genuine vs forged spiral	A persisting, high-satisfaction cycle may be catastrophic beneath the aggregate	§2.11.1
Cultivation vs legislation (养而不宰)	Cultivation guides the habit-forming dynamics; legislation possesses it	§2.9.2
Preservation of betrayability	A habit is cultivated insofar as its continuance remains a renewed joint choice	§2.9.3

CHAPTER 3

The Sweet Cycle

*On a magazine cover in Ginza the author encountered a proposition stated without hedging: that sweetness is justice. The proposition is the occasion of this paper, not its target. What it names, in the idiom of intimate life, is a cycle that appears to harm no one and to benefit everyone who can be seen within it. A firm sells, a person who is indulged feels cared for, a person who indulges feels needed, the bond is strengthened, and the strengthened bond returns as a willingness to buy again. Inside its own boundary the cycle closes upon a surplus of satisfaction, and the satisfaction is real. This paper asks on what grounds, and under what conditions, such a cycle may be judged genuinely good rather than a forged closure that sustains its inner surplus by extraction across its outer edge. The inquiry proceeds by placing several incommensurable frameworks before the same phenomenon, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, the ethics of care, political economy, and feminist theory, and letting each say what it can and cannot say. None is permitted to adjudicate the others. A psychoanalytic foundation, reconstructed here in full from the author's prior work on lack, the *objet a*, and the cute as a mediation of lack, supplies the structural diagram on which the later analysis is fought. The political economy of *amai*, in which capital does not merely serve a pre-existing desire but produces and reproduces the desire itself and extracts a surplus from its reproduction, receives the most sustained treatment, because it is there that the difference between a genuine and a forged cycle becomes measurable. The paper does not close on a single verdict. It closes on a plurality of practices, just, ethical, eudaimonic, and co-creative, by which a sweet cycle might be made to keep its value within itself and to return that value to those who make it, with no one reduced to fuel.*

3.1. Prologue: Sweetness as Justice in Ginza

On a magazine cover in Ginza the author read a phrase that arranged cosmetics, small accessories, and clothing under a single heading: that the sweet is justice. 甘いは正義。I take this phrase as it presents itself in public, as a proposition, and I do not pass through it to the contents it advertises or to the people who make or read it. The proposition is enough. It is enough because it performs, in four characters, a movement that this paper will spend many pages trying to slow down and examine: it takes a register of intimate life, sweetness, indulgence, the small daily economy of being charmed and charming, and it confers on that register the name of a virtue. Not pleasure, not comfort, but justice. The naming is doing something, and the first task is to feel why it is at once so persuasive and so unsettling.

It is worth pausing on the grammar of the phrase before pausing on its truth, because the grammar is already an argument. The copula is doing the work. To say that the sweet is pleasant would be to report a feeling; to say that the sweet sells would be to report a fact about markets; to say that the sweet is kind would be to praise a disposition. The phrase says none of these. It places sweetness and justice on the two sides of an identity, and an identity claim of this form does something a mere predication does not: it offers to settle in advance a question that justice, of all concepts, exists precisely to keep open. Justice is the name we give to the unfinished work of asking whether an arrangement is defensible to all whom it touches. To declare that something simply *is* justice is to propose that the asking is over, that the verdict is in, that one may now enjoy the arrangement with the conscience at rest. The cover, in other words, does not merely advertise objects. It advertises a kind of permission. And the discomfort that prompts this paper is, at bottom, a discomfort with permission granted too quickly, with a verdict announced before the trial.

This is the deeper reason the proposition cannot be passed over as a mere slogan. Slogans that promise pleasure or beauty make no claim on the conscience and so provoke no scruple. A slogan that promises justice enlists the conscience on the side of consumption, and it is the enlistment, not the consumption, that asks to be examined. The phrase is an unusually honest specimen precisely because it says the quiet part aloud. Much of consumer culture works by keeping its appeal in the register of desire and never raising

the question of justice at all. This cover raises it, names it, and answers it in the same breath, and in doing so it hands the critic both the question and a confession that the question was felt to need answering.

It is persuasive because the cycle it names does seem, from inside, to be good. Consider the cycle in its plainest form. A person buys something that makes them feel sweet, cute, worth indulging. They bring this sweetness into a relationship, where it is received as an invitation to care. The one who cares feels needed, and being needed is its own reward. The bond tightens. A tighter bond makes both parties more willing, next time, to spend on the small mediations that let the sweetness continue. The firm that sold the first object profits and is thereby enabled to offer the next. Every party named in this description ends better off than they began. No one inside the circle is visibly wronged. If justice is, in one serviceable sense, an arrangement in which value is generated and returned to those who generate it, then the cycle appears to satisfy it. This is not a strawman to be knocked down. It is, I will argue at length, the strongest thing that can be said for *amai*, and it must be said in full strength before anything else is said.

It will help to give the cycle a face, since abstraction tends to make these loops look thinner than they are in life. Imagine a person who, on a difficult morning, chooses a small bright thing, a tinted balm, a ribbon, a charm for a bag, and feels, in choosing it, a lift that is not vanity but something closer to self-address, a way of saying to oneself that one is worth a small tenderness. That tenderness is carried into the day and into a relationship, where the partner notices, is charmed, and answers the charm with an attention that would not have been called forth otherwise. The person feels met. The partner feels the particular warmth of being the one who meets. Neither would describe what passed between them as a transaction, and they would be right, because what passed between them was recognition, and recognition is not bought even when its occasion was. The next time the small bright thing is chosen, it is chosen against the memory of having been met, and so the object now carries a freight of relation it did not carry at first. This is not a trivial circuit. It is one of the ways ordinary love actually sustains itself across the wear of ordinary time, and any account that cannot feel its genuine warmth has disqualified itself from judging it.

One can put the cycle's apparent goodness in the formal vocabulary the series has de-

veloped, and doing so raises rather than lowers the stakes. The loop does not look like sterile repetition, the mere going-around that returns each party to where they began with nothing gained. It looks like a spiral that climbs: each turn deepens the bond a little beyond the last, something is laid down that was not there before, the return is not to the same point but to a higher one. In the series' terms the cycle appears to carry a positive holonomy, a real accumulation of relational value across each traversal rather than a flat circulation that nets to nothing. And it appears to carry that holonomy from within, generated by the participants' own exchange and not imported from any reservoir outside them. Were that appearance to hold under scrutiny, the cycle would be not merely permissible but exemplary, a small working proof that intimate life and economic life can be made to feed one another without either degrading the other. The whole drama of this paper lies in the words *were that appearance to hold*.

It is unsettling for a reason that the cover itself supplies. The cover does not say that sweetness is pleasant, or profitable, or kind. It says that sweetness is just. And a claim of justice is never only a description of those who are present in the frame. Justice is a claim about a whole, about who is counted and who is not, about where the costs of an arrangement come to rest. The moment sweetness is named as justice, the question of justice is opened, and that question cannot be answered by looking only at the satisfied faces inside the circle. It requires us to ask what lies across the circle's edge, who or what is reproducing the conditions of all that sweetness, and whether the inner surplus is generated within the loop or drawn in from outside it. The cover, by reaching for the word justice, hands us the very standard by which its own proposition must be tested.

This paper is the twelfth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice, and it occupies a particular place in that series. Where earlier papers built the formal vocabulary, the distinction between a cycle that accumulates value within itself and one that only appears to, the criterion of return to the creator, the diagnosis of an open system that masquerades as a closed loop, this paper does not build that vocabulary again. It puts it to work on a single, concrete, contemporary phenomenon. *Amai* is not the goal of the inquiry. It is the inquiry's best instrument, because it is a case in which the reality of the satisfaction and the suspicion of the structure are both maximal at once. The relationship really is strengthened. The labor that underwrites the strengthening

may really be hidden. A case where one of these were weak would teach us little. *Amai* is sharp precisely because neither is weak.

Two terms from the series will recur often enough to deserve a plain statement here, so that a reader who has not followed the earlier papers is not left guessing. The first is holonomy, borrowed from the geometry of transport around a loop. The image is of carrying something, a value, an orientation, a measure of worth, once around a closed path and asking whether it returns changed. If it returns to its starting point exactly as it left, the loop has done no lasting work, and the series calls this a zero holonomy, the signature of mere circulation. If it returns enriched, with a real increment that the traversal itself produced, the loop has accumulated, and the series calls this a positive holonomy, the signature of genuine generation. The second term is the forged holonomy, and it names the case that this paper will argue *amai* exemplifies: a loop that displays the increment of a positive holonomy but did not generate it internally, having instead drawn it in from outside the path while presenting itself as closed. The whole question of whether a sweet cycle is good reduces, in these terms, to whether its evident accumulation is generated or forged, and that is a question one cannot answer without following the value across the edge the cycle would prefer we not cross.

A word on method, since the method is itself a claim. I will not resolve *amai* into a verdict by subordinating every framework to a master framework that pronounces the truth of the rest. I will instead set several frameworks before the same phenomenon, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, the ethics of care, political economy, feminist theory, and require each to state, in its own voice, what it is able to see and what it is constitutively unable to see. They will not agree. Psychoanalysis will describe a desire that no satisfaction closes; neuroscience will confirm that the satisfaction is a real event in the nervous system; the ethics of care will find a genuine tending of persons; political economy will find an extraction; feminism will divide against itself. That they do not agree is not a defect of the inquiry to be repaired by a final synthesis. It is, I will propose, what *amai* has to teach. The goodness or badness of a cycle that looks good is not the kind of thing that lives inside a single framework's jurisdiction. It lives in the polyphony, and the honest form for such a truth is a set of conclusions in the plural, with no one of them permitted the last word.

3.2. The Missing Mediation: Lack, the Cute, and Amai

To ask what is exchanged in a sweet cycle, one must first ask what *amai* is, and the answer requires a theoretical foundation that this paper, rather than gesturing toward in another text, will lay out in full here. The foundation is psychoanalytic, and it concerns the way a symbolic order generates, sustains, and mediates a lack around which subjects and their desire are organized. Because the argument is the structural ground for everything that follows, on the cute, on *amai*, on the political economy of the sweet cycle, and on the practices that close the paper, it is given its own section and developed without abbreviation. I have presented a version of this argument elsewhere in Chinese; what follows is its full development in English, recast so that it flows into the analysis of *amai* that is this paper's concern.

3.2.1 A Note on the Status of the Concepts

A clarification must precede the argument, because the argument uses terms that are easily and damagingly misread. The Lacanian vocabulary that follows, and in particular the expressions “feminine position,” “masculine position,” and “hysteric structure,” are technical terms internal to a particular psychoanalytic theory. They denote *structural positions within a symbolic system*, not empirical claims about women, men, or any actual person. The “feminine position” in Lacanian theory names a structural relation to the symbolic order, the position of what cannot be fully inscribed within the order's central organizing logic, and it can be occupied by a subject of any gender. It is not a statement about biological sex, social gender, personality, or the psychology of real individuals. Likewise the term “hysteric structure” is, in this theory, a technical name for a particular mode of relation between subject and symbolic order, and bears no relation to the term's colloquial or pathologizing uses.

This matters for two reasons. First, intellectual honesty requires acknowledging that the theory reconstructed below was produced in mid-twentieth-century European psychoanalysis and rests on assumptions, the universality of a certain symbolic structure, the centrality of a single organizing signifier, the universality of the Oedipal narrative, that have been extensively criticized by feminist theory, queer theory, and post-structuralism, and that this paper does not endorse as descriptions of how gender or subjectivity must

be. The aim in reconstructing the theory is to understand its internal logic and to extract from it a structural insight about lack and mediation that the later sections need, not to defend its presuppositions or to apply them as norms to actual people. Second, the later feminist section of this paper will itself turn a critical eye on exactly these presuppositions, and the reader should hold the reconstruction that follows as a theoretical instrument under examination, not as an endorsed account of women. With that frame in place, the argument can be given its full strength, which is what it requires in order to do its later work.

3.2.2 The Problem of the Feminine in Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalysis confronted a theoretical difficulty about the feminine from its beginning. Freud confessed his perplexity before feminine psychology in the famous question of what a woman wants, and the question marks a structural obstacle the early theory met rather than a mere gap in observation. Freud tried to understand the formation of the feminine subject through a series of concepts concerning sexual development, but his frameworks took male development as their reference and placed the feminine in a derivative, supplementary position. This difficulty exposed not only the limits of early psychoanalysis but, more deeply, a fundamental problem in the theoretical system of the time when it came to treating the feminine position.

It was not until Lacan's work in the middle decades of the twentieth century that psychoanalysis advanced a new understanding of the feminine position. By importing structural linguistics and Saussurean semiotics, Lacan re-grounded psychoanalysis upon an analysis of the symbolic order. Within this frame he advanced the well-known assertion that woman does not exist, *La femme n'existe pas*. The theoretical content of the claim is this: at the level of the symbolic system, there is no fully definable, fully nameable feminine essence.

The claim bears on how the subject is constituted by desire, how it enters the order of language, and how it relates to the desire of the other. For Lacan the symbolic order is a system built around a central signifier, for which he used the term *phallus*, understood here as a signifier of symbolic function derived from his symbolic reworking of the Oedipus complex, and it organizes subject positions through the presence and absence of that

signifier. In Lacan's theoretical assumption, a subject occupying the masculine position can obtain a stable location within this system of having and not-having by identifying with the symbolic position of the father, whereas a subject occupying the feminine position remains outside that logic. "Outside" here means not fully inscribable within the symbolic system. The feminine position is, in Lacan's account, always in excess, remaining, not fully nameable, and this is precisely what constitutes a particular structure of subjectivity, which in the psychoanalytic tradition has been called the hysteric subject, again a strictly technical designation that has nothing to do with the colloquial or pathological sense of the word.

When Lacan discusses the association of the feminine position with this particular structure of subjectivity, what concerns him is an isomorphism between a subjective structure and the symbolic order, well beyond any clinical symptom or pathology. In his theoretical system the feminine position and this subjective structure exhibit a correspondence within the symbolic, because both confront the same fundamental predicament: how to come into being and sustain subjectivity within an order that cannot provide them a complete name. The predicament, on Lacan's analysis, arises from a structural asymmetry of the symbolic order itself rather than from any essential difference between the sexes.

3.2.3 The Self-Reference of the Symbolic and the Emergence of Lack

To understand how this mechanism is generated, one must return to its ontological presupposition. In Lacan's framework the operation of the symbolic order depends on a self-referential structure. The generativity of the cosmos, the continuation of life, the reproduction of society, and desire itself all must point back toward themselves in order to reproduce. This self-reference points toward the very possibility of continuation, beyond any external terminus. The symbolic order exists, on this account, so that being may go on being generable, not in order to finish saying being.

Yet a core thesis of the theory is that the symbol can never exhaust the real. This is the very condition under which the symbolic order keeps operating. The symbol must designate being, and yet it necessarily produces, within itself, a point that cannot be said in full. If lack were to appear directly, Lacan holds, desire would collapse, meaning would break off, and the subject would slide toward a psychotic rupture. The symbolic order

therefore faces a structural requirement: lack must be seen but not faced, sensed but not possessed.

From this arises the necessity of one of the theory's central concepts, the *objet petit a*. It is a mediating position that neither coincides with lack nor fills it. The *objet a* functions as the cause of desire, *cause du désir*, rather than its satisfaction. In Lacan's construction, lack emerges structurally as the condition that makes self-reference possible. Any symbolic society, when it runs stably, will almost necessarily generate this structural solution, because a society must continuously reproduce desire, or else the subject will cease to act, to connect, to create. Desire, in Lacan's theory, must be sustained through mediation, in a process that can be completed neither by satisfaction nor by cancellation.

3.2.4 Paths of Subject Formation

In Lacan's framework the formation of a subject occupying the masculine position is described thus: through the Oedipus complex and the intervention of the name of the father, the subject undergoes a process of symbolic identification. The boy, by identifying with the father, obtains within the symbolic order a position associated with the symbolic position the father is supposed to hold. Lacan abstracts this mechanism into a distinction of having and not-having organized around a central signifier: the father is supposed to have this signifier, the mother is positioned as lacking it, and the masculine subject, by identifying with the father, obtains a symbolic location on the side of having. In this schema subjectivity amounts to obtaining a determinable position within the system of the distinction, a closed process that can be completed by symbolic relations alone.

It must be said that this binary distinction is Lacan's theoretical construction after a symbolic reworking of the Freudian Oedipus complex, and that the construction rests on an assumed universality of the Oedipus complex. The symbolic system need not take the form of this binary. The assumption is itself widely contested in contemporary theory, a point the later feminist section will press.

Lacan's theoretical observation is that the symbolic order can hardly furnish the subject of the feminine position with a closable place. In his assumption, because the symbolic order is organized around the central signifier and its distinction of having and not-having, and because in the classic Oedipal narrative the feminine is positioned as the one lacking

the signifier, the feminine position cannot be fully mapped into the system of distinction. In Lacan's description the feminine position lies in an unclosed zone between symbol and real. This position can hardly complete a subjective closure by symbolic relations alone, and so Lacan observes that the subject of this position tends to seek, test, and generate its own position within the structures of relation in the register of the real.

Lacan uses the concept of the not-all, *pas-toute*, to describe the relation between the feminine position and the symbolic order. The not-all names a fundamental condition of not being wholly subsumable under symbolic logic, and exceeds the senses of partial or incomplete. This construction attempts to explain certain of Lacan's clinical observations, observations that, it must again be stressed, were grounded in the clinical practice and social context of the mid-twentieth century and whose universality and applicability are widely questioned today.

In Lacan's schema these phenomena are read as one possible outcome of a path of subject formation. When the symbolic system can hardly supply a completed position, the theory holds, the subject may seek the confirmation of its existence more in the continual generation of relation. But the subject is a relational subject, relation requires a continuous dynamics to sustain it, and the core of that dynamics in Lacan's theory is precisely desire.

3.2.5 From Structure to Generation: The Missing Mediation

Lacan's theory offers not only a static structural analysis but an account of the subject's becoming. Turning to the generative perspective brings the theory's key insight into view. The crux is the dynamics of relational structure and its sustainability. In Lacan's frame, a possible difficulty the subject of the feminine position faces is this: standing in a position to which the order can hardly furnish an adequate name, how is relation to be kept running?

Lacan's analysis holds that any relation, to continue, may need to rely on desire, on tension, and on incompleteness. His theory of desire states that the structure of desire points toward the continuation of lack, beyond pointing toward any object as such. One may render the theoretical premise as a chain of dependencies: in Lacan's frame, the stability of the subject is bound up with the continuation of relational dynamics, relational

dynamics with the continuation of desire, and desire with the continuation of lack, so that the subject's stability is, in a degree, bound up with the persistence of lack. In Lacan's theory, lack can become a bearer of stability.

But Lacan analyzes further that if lack is merely an external condition, then once lack is filled, displaced, or denied by the other, the dynamics of relation may break off. For a subject position more dependent on relational structure, this may constitute a certain risk. Hence a generative mechanism the theory proposes: to let "my own self" become the site at which lack can appear, be approached, and be sustained, so that lack is transformed from an external condition into an internal subjective function. This process may convert the persistence of lack into a function of the subject itself, which is one theoretical description of the position of the *objet a*.

When the subject ties its stability more to the persistence of lack, Lacan's theory conjectures, it may, at the level of experience, present in certain patterns, confirming through being desired, being needed, being aimed at, that relation is still being generated. In Lacan's theory, to be desired by the other can become a sign that lack is still in operation.

It is at exactly this point that an extension of the theory toward cultural forms becomes possible, and it is the hinge on which this paper turns from psychoanalysis toward *amai*. Some contemporary scholars, extending Lacanian theory, have analyzed the operation of particular cultural symbols. In discussing certain aesthetic categories, Sianne Ngai has indicated that the cute, *kawaii*, as a cultural representation, may operate differently from the beautiful. If the beautiful inclines toward completion, symmetry, and stability, the cute may instead contain incompleteness, a slight asymmetry, and a summons toward response and attention. From the standpoint of Lacanian theory, such a cultural symbol may operate through the not-all, through marginality, through unclosedness, and so play a particular role in the economy of desire.

It must be stressed that this kind of cultural analysis depends heavily on a specific theoretical frame and cultural context. Any attempt to apply a theoretical model to concrete cultural practice demands great caution, because the meaning of a cultural symbol is plural, fluid, and situation-dependent. The discussion here serves as one possible extension of Lacanian theory, and should not be read as a normative interpretation of any cultural

phenomenon, still less as an evaluation of any group's behavior or aesthetic choices. In the theoretical language of Lacan, certain cultural representations may function as a mediation of lack, but the relation between this theoretical description and concrete cultural practice and individual experience always requires a critical distance and an openness to reflection.

3.2.6 The Internal Logic of the Schema

To gather the reconstruction: because the subject of the feminine position can hardly complete a subjective closure through the symbolic order, its stability may depend more on the continual generation of relation in the register of the real. Under the assumption that the continual generation of relation depends on desire, and that desire operates on the condition that lack persists, Lacan's analysis proposes that, in order to sustain its stability, the subject of the feminine position may tend to embed the persistence of lack as a part of its own subjective function, so that lack is transformed from a fillable external condition into an internal component of the subject. Under this generative perspective, Lacan's analysis holds that the feminine position may incline toward the position of a mediation of lack, and may present, at the level of experience, as a particular structural pattern of subjectivity.

The core of this structure, in Lacan's account, is to take oneself as the site at which the desire of the other may be continually kept in question. The subject of the feminine position, because the symbol can hardly close, may need to generate itself within relation, and because relation may need to be sustained through desire, may incline to take the question of what I am in your desire, the *Che vuoi?*, as a central problem through which the subject continually generates itself. This mechanism, Lacan suggests, may arise under the structural condition that, in a society centered on the symbol and operating through the maintenance of desire, lack needs to be made accessible without being eliminated. Historically and structurally, the feminine position may tend to occupy the place of the mediation of lack, which may be a result of the symbolic system's search for stability.

3.2.7 Building on the Reconstruction: How the Cute and Amai Become Legible

The reconstruction has done its structural work, and the paper can now draw from it the consequences that the analysis of *amai* requires. The first consequence concerns the cute. If the cute operates, as the extension above proposes, through incompleteness and the summons to response, through holding lack open rather than closing it, then the cute is not merely a taste or a style but a form with a precise function in the economy of desire: it is a culturally elaborated mediation of lack. The cute object does not satisfy; it solicits. It keeps the question of the other's response alive by presenting itself as unfinished, as needing to be answered. This is why the cute can sustain an endless relation to itself where the beautiful, inclining toward completion, tends to release the beholder into repose. The cute does not release; it calls again.

The second consequence brings us to *amai* itself, and here the reconstruction pays its full debt. *Amai*, the licensed reliance through which a bond knows itself, can now be seen as a relational enactment of exactly the structure the reconstruction describes. *Amai*, the adjectival root of 甘え, names in the Japanese psychological tradition, in Takeo Doi's classic treatment, the presumption upon another's indulgence. What the one who is indulged seeks is not, at bottom, the object through which the indulgence passes; it is the confirmation of being wanted, the sign that lack is still in operation between the two, that the other's desire still turns toward oneself. In the vocabulary the reconstruction supplies, the one who practices *amai* takes up, within the relation, the position of the mediation of lack, making of the bond a site at which the question *what am I in your desire* can be continually posed and continually, partially, answered. Doi's account and Lacan's reconstruction, arrived at from entirely different traditions, here describe one and the same relational form.

Doi's analysis deserves to be held a moment longer, because it adds a feature the reconstruction does not by itself supply and the later sections will need. For Doi, 甘え is not a private feeling but a relational presupposition, the often unspoken expectation that the other will receive one's reliance with goodwill, and it is constitutive rather than incidental: a relation in which such reliance could not be presumed would not, on this account, be an intimate relation at all. Two consequences follow. First, 甘え is structurally reciprocal even when enacted asymmetrically, for the one who presumes and the one who indulges

are not opposed roles but two moments of a single relational form that requires both. Second, and this is the feature the critical sections will exploit, the presumption can be true or false to itself. It can be met with the goodwill it presumes, in which case the reliance is answered and the bond is real; or it can be met with a simulation of goodwill, a performance of indulgence that is in fact extracting something, in which case the very structure that makes intimacy possible becomes the structure through which intimacy is counterfeited. *Amai* is thus, from the start, a form that can be inhabited well or ill, and Doi's account already contains, without naming it, the possibility of a forged version of the thing.

The third consequence is the one the whole later argument turns on. If *amai* is the relational mediation of lack, then the objects of the sweet cycle, the cosmetics, the small accessories, the things gathered under the sign of sweetness, are the material mediations of that mediation. They are the *objet a* in commodity form. To purchase the sweet thing is to purchase access to the question, *am I still wanted*, and to receive, in the partner's indulgence, the sign that the question is still alive. And because the cute object holds lack open rather than closing it, the purchasing does not terminate. A satisfied desire would end it; a desire mediated by the cute is, by design, never quite satisfied, and so it returns. This is the precise structural reason the sweet cycle can renew itself without end, and it is the reason, the political economy will argue, that capital found in *amai* so apt a structure to occupy.

3.2.8 Need, Demand, Desire: The Triad the Later Analysis Requires

One distinction internal to the reconstruction must be set out plainly on its own, because the whole later analysis of how capital operates on *amai* depends on it. A need, in this vocabulary, is a deficit that an object can fill: hunger is filled by food and then is gone until it returns. A demand is what a need becomes when it must pass through another person and through language to be met, and because it passes through another, a demand is never only a demand for the thing, it is always also a demand to be the kind of being whose demand the other will answer, a demand, that is, for love. Desire is the remainder that no satisfaction of demand exhausts, the surplus of the demand for love over any particular thing given in response. This remainder is structural and permanent. One can be given the thing one asked for and still not have been given the recognition one was

asking through it, and the gap between the two is where desire lives. The reason this matters for *amai* is that the cycle operates precisely on the gap. It offers, through the commodity, an endless series of partial answers to a demand that by its nature cannot be finally answered, and the endlessness is not a malfunction of the cycle but its engine. A cycle built on need would terminate when the need was met. A cycle built on desire renews itself forever, because the remainder it addresses is never used up.

It is essential, and the later critical sections will turn on this, that none of this is in itself sinister. That a relation runs on a lack kept open is not a flaw in the relation; it is, on the reconstruction's account, what makes it a living relation rather than a closed and finished arrangement between two satisfied parties who no longer have any question to put to one another. The danger enters not with the structure of desire but with what a particular social organization does to that structure, and the central claim of the political economy to come is that capital has learned to occupy the gap, to insert itself as the necessary supplier of the partial answers, and to enlarge the gap deliberately so that ever more answers must be bought. At this stage the point is only that *amai*, read through need, demand, and desire, is a structure whose very openness, the openness that makes it intimate and alive, is also the opening through which it can be colonized.

3.2.9 The Image of the Sweet Self

There is a further layer, and it is the layer at which a later section's question about flourishing will be decided, so it is named here and left armed. What is consumed in the sweet cycle is not only an object and not only the partner's indulgence. It is an image of the self as the one who is indulged, the sweet self, the self worth being charmed by. This is consumption in the register Baudrillard described, where what circulates is the sign and not the use, and it is capture in the register the present series calls the imaginary, where a living dynamic is fixed into a flattering picture of itself. The danger is not that the image is false. The danger is that the image can substitute for the very thing it pictures. A self can come to consume the image of being indulged in place of the slower, riskier, genuinely generative work of unfolding its own singular dynamic with another. Whether the sweet cycle opens that unfolding or forecloses it, whether the image is a medium of generation or a cage that stands in for it, is precisely the question this paper will later put under the name of the eudaimonic.

It is worth being precise about why the imaginary capture is so difficult to detect from within, since the difficulty is what gives the forged cycle its cover. The image of the sweet self is not experienced as an image. It is experienced as oneself, as who one simply is, and the labor of producing and maintaining it disappears into the feeling of merely being oneself well. This is the imaginary's characteristic operation: it does not announce itself as a representation, it presents itself as immediate reality. A person caught in the image does not feel they are consuming a picture; they feel they are being authentic, that the small bright thing expresses rather than constructs them. And because the partner too responds to the image as though to the person, the cycle can run for a long time on the smooth surface of the image without anyone touching the singular dynamic underneath. Nothing in the experience flags the substitution. This is why the eudaimonic criterion, when it arrives, cannot be applied by asking the participants whether they feel fulfilled; they may feel entirely fulfilled by the image precisely in the measure that the image has succeeded. The criterion will have to ask a harder question, about whether the relation is generating anything genuinely new between two unfolding singularities, or only polishing two pictures to a higher shine.

3.2.10 What the Foundation Opens: Toward Political Economy and Practice

Two contemporary considerations extend the reconstruction in the direction the rest of the paper will travel, and naming them here closes this section by handing its insight forward. The first is that the stability of the symbolic order which Lacan presupposed is itself, in the present, under new strain. In an age of highly symbolic technologies, of large language models, algorithmic decision systems, and automated symbolic production, the generation, distribution, and reproduction of meaning are increasingly detached from a human, subject-centered structure. This re-poses the question of how the subject is constituted, and it makes the relational, affective, and ethical dimensions of existence newly salient. It is against this background that feminist theory, the ethics of care, and the discussion of relational capacities such as empathy and co-presence offer crucial resources, resources that think the subject from the standpoint of relational being and that exceed any single question of gender. The reconstruction's value, in this light, is not as a fixed account of women but as a historicized lens on how the relational capacities long positioned at the margin, the capacities of the mediation of lack, come to the center

precisely when the symbolic order trembles.

The second consideration is the one that drives the remainder of this paper. If the mediation of lack is a structural position that a symbolic society generates because it must continually reproduce desire, then a society organized by capital will not leave that position unoccupied. It will discover, occupy, and industrialize it. The reconstruction shows that *amai* is the relational mediation of lack and that the cute object is its material form. The political economy to come will show that capital has learned to insert its commodity into exactly the place where the mediation of lack does its work, to supply the partial answers the demand for love requires, and to enlarge the lack deliberately so that the supply must be bought again and again. The structure the reconstruction describes as the condition of a living relation becomes, under capital, the structure of an extraction, and the practices that close the paper will ask whether the living relation can be recovered from the extraction that has colonized it. The foundation laid in this section is thus not a digression into psychoanalysis but the precise diagram of the field on which the rest of the argument is fought. The structure of *amai* is that field. The question the following sections take up is who is farming it, at whose expense, and how it might be farmed otherwise.

3.3. The Strongest Version of the Good Cycle

Before the cycle is tested it must be granted its full strength, and granting it is not a rhetorical concession but a methodological requirement. A critique that defeats a weak version of its object has defeated nothing. The sweet cycle deserves its strongest formulation, and that formulation is available in the language of generative justice, where an arrangement counts as good when it generates value and returns that value to those who generate it, rather than siphoning it to a party who contributes nothing to the generation. Read within its own boundary, the sweet cycle satisfies this standard with a completeness that should give any critic pause.

The standard deserves to be stated carefully, because it is the most demanding form of the case for the cycle and the form the rest of the paper must contend with. Generative justice, as developed in the work this series engages most closely, departs from the familiar

liberal framing in which justice is a matter of distributing a fixed stock of goods fairly after they have been produced. Its concern is upstream of distribution. It asks how value is generated in the first place and whether the value returns to those whose activity generated it, or is alienated from them and accumulated elsewhere. The paradigm of injustice on this account is not an unequal slice of the pie but an arrangement in which those who bake are systematically separated from what they bake, so that value flows away from its generators to a point of concentration. The paradigm of justice, correspondingly, is a cycle in which the value generated by an activity returns to nourish the activity and those who carry it out, a self-sustaining loop with no leak to an external accumulator. This is a strong and attractive ideal, and the reason the sweet cycle is such a formidable case is that, viewed within its own boundary, it appears to instantiate the ideal almost perfectly.

Trace it once more, slowly, granting each step its due. A firm offers an object in the register of the cute. A person acquires it and is thereby enabled to bring a certain sweetness into a relationship. The partner receives this sweetness as an address and answers it with indulgence, and in answering feels the specific reward of being the one who is relied upon, the one whose care is wanted. The first person, indulged, receives the confirmation they sought, that they are wanted, that the lack between the two is still in living operation. The bond is, by this exchange, not merely maintained but deepened, because each party has given the other something the other genuinely values and has received something in return. The deepened bond raises, rather than lowers, the willingness of both to invest again in the small mediations that let the exchange recur. The firm, profiting, is enabled to continue offering. Around the loop, value has been generated, the value of a strengthened intimate bond, and it has been returned to those who generated it. No party named in the loop is a mere instrument of another. Each is at once a contributor and a beneficiary.

One should resist the temptation to weaken this picture prematurely by pointing out that the firm's motive is profit. The objection is too quick, and answering it strengthens the case rather than undermining it. That a party acts from interest does not, on the generative account, make an arrangement unjust; the baker who is nourished by the bread acts from interest too. What would make it unjust is a leak, a flow of value out of the

loop to someone who contributes nothing to the generation and returns nothing to it. Within the boundary as the strongest version draws it, there is no such leak. The firm contributes the object that mediates the recognition and is paid for that contribution; its profit is, on this reading, its share of a value it helped generate, not a siphoning of value it did not. So long as the boundary holds where the strongest version places it, the profit motive is not an embarrassment to the cycle's justice but is simply absorbed into it. The cycle does not merely tolerate the firm; it justifies the firm's return. This is how complete the strongest version is, and it is why the critique to come cannot proceed by moral disapproval of commerce. It must proceed by challenging the boundary itself.

One can put the point in the vocabulary the series has developed and the case only grows stronger. The cycle does not look like sterile repetition, the mere going-around that returns each party to exactly where they began with nothing accumulated. It looks like a spiral. Each turn deepens the bond a little further than the last; something is accumulated that was not there before; the return is not to the same point but to a higher one. In the series' terms the loop appears to carry a positive holonomy, a real sublimation of value across the cycle rather than a flat circulation. And it appears to carry that holonomy internally, generated by the participants' own exchange, not imported from some reservoir outside. If that appearance held, the cycle would be not merely permissible but exemplary, a small working model of how intimate life and economic life might be made to reinforce one another without either corrupting the other.

I want to leave this section without a single qualification attached to it, because the qualifications are the work of the sections that follow and they should not be allowed to leak backward and weaken what must first stand at full height. The strongest version of the good cycle is genuinely strong. Anyone who feels its force is feeling something real. The discomfort that the Ginza cover also provokes does not come from any weakness in this account. It comes from a suspicion that this account, however true within its frame, has drawn its frame too small, and that the goodness it correctly perceives is purchased by not looking past the edge. To look past the edge is the task that begins now. But the account just given is the thing that must be looked past, and it is not a thing to be ashamed of having found compelling.

3.4. Many Frameworks, One Cycle: Incommensurable Readings

The strongest version having been granted, the cycle can now be approached from several directions at once. This section places six frameworks before it, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, the ethics of care, structuralism and linguistics, dialectics, and Kantian ethics, and asks each not only what it sees but what it cannot see. The two heaviest frameworks, political economy and feminism, are held for sections of their own, and the formal instruments that can be brought to bear, the dynamical, grammatical, field-theoretic, categorial, game-theoretic, and information-theoretic, are gathered in the section that follows this one, since they are tools of a different kind. The discipline observed throughout is that no framework is allowed to deliver the others' verdict. Each illuminates one face of *amai* and goes dark at the edge of its competence, and the darkness is reported as carefully as the light.

A word is owed on why the frameworks are kept incommensurable rather than integrated, since the reflex of much scholarship is to seek a synthesis in which each contributes a piece to a single completed picture. The refusal of synthesis here is not eclecticism or a failure of nerve. It rests on a claim about the object: that the goodness of a cycle which looks good is not a unitary property awaiting measurement by a sufficiently comprehensive instrument, but a question that genuinely receives different and irreconcilable answers depending on the scale and the stance from which it is asked. Psychoanalysis asks at the scale of the desiring subject and answers in the currency of desire. Neuroscience asks at the scale of the nervous system and answers in the currency of neural event. The ethics of care asks at the scale of the face-to-face relation and answers in the currency of responsiveness. Structuralism asks at the scale of the sign system and answers in the currency of difference. Dialectics asks at the scale of the self-moving process and answers in the currency of contradiction. Kantian ethics asks at the scale of the rational will and answers in the currency of the maxim. These are not several views of one thing that could be added together; they are several things, each real, that the single word *amai* happens to name at once. To force them into a synthesis would be to choose, covertly, one framework's currency as the master currency into which the others must be converted, and that covert choice is exactly the move the paper's method is designed to refuse. The honest alternative is to let each speak fully and to let the dissonance stand as a finding.

3.4.1 The Epistemology of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis sees the sweet cycle better than any other framework at one specific thing: it sees why the cycle never ends. The earlier account of *amai* as a demand for love mediated by the *objet a* explains what no account of pleasure or utility can, namely that the satisfaction the cycle delivers is structurally incomplete and must be incomplete in order to recur. If the purchasing satisfied a need, the purchasing would stop. It continues because what is sought is not a need's satisfaction but the maintenance of a desire, the standing confirmation that one is still wanted, and desire is sustained only by a lack kept in operation. Psychoanalysis can therefore say something true and non-obvious: the endlessness of the cycle is not a sign of addiction or of manipulation alone, it is the signature of desire as such, and a relation that kept desire alive would also, for that very reason, never be done.

But this is also the exact place where psychoanalysis must report its own limit, and the report is part of its contribution rather than an embarrassment to it. Psychoanalysis can tell us that desire is in operation. It cannot tell us whether the cycle in which that desire operates is just. The structure of demand and lack is the same whether the loop is internally generative or sustained by extraction from outside; the *objet a* does its work identically in a cycle that wrongs no one and in a cycle that runs on hidden labor. The framework that best explains why the cycle persists is constitutively silent on whether the cycle is good. This silence is not a gap to be filled by more psychoanalysis. It is a boundary of jurisdiction, and noting where it falls tells us that the question of justice will have to be carried by frameworks of a different kind.

There is a further and subtler contribution that psychoanalysis makes precisely by way of its silence, and it concerns the seductiveness of the cycle to thought itself. Because the structure of desire is so satisfying to describe, so elegant in its account of why the cycle renews, there is a temptation to feel that in having explained the cycle one has also exonerated it, that to show how natural and structural the endlessness is, is to show that there is nothing to object to. This is a false inference and a dangerous one, and psychoanalysis, properly understood, warns against it. To explain a mechanism is not to license it. The same desire that makes intimacy alive can be harnessed to an extraction, and the elegance of the explanation of desire says nothing about whether the particular

harness is just. Psychoanalysis thus offers not only an account of the cycle but a caution against its own seductiveness as an account: it can make the cycle intelligible without making it innocent, and the reader who feels the explanation settle their unease should treat that settling as itself a datum to be examined rather than a verdict to be trusted. The framework that explains desire is, in this respect, the framework most likely to be mistaken for an absolution, and it disclaims the role explicitly.

3.4.2 Neuroscience: The Reward and Attachment Substrate of *Amai*

Neuroscience contributes something the more interpretive frameworks cannot, an anchor in the body that prevents the whole discussion from floating off into pure construction. The satisfactions of the sweet cycle are not only meanings; they are events in the nervous system. The indulgence at the heart of *amai* engages the circuitry of attachment and reward. The bonding that follows shared care recruits the neuropeptide systems, oxytocin among them, that subserve pair bonding and social trust, and the small recurring gratifications of the cycle engage the dopaminergic reward pathways that track not consummation so much as anticipation, the wanting that precedes and outlasts any particular getting. The objects of the cycle are largely objects in the register of the cute, and the cute is not an arbitrary cultural taste. The infantile schema, the large eyes and rounded forms that Konrad Lorenz first described and that later work has tied to activation in reward-related regions on a rapid timescale, recruits a caregiving and reward response that is to a significant degree pre-cultural. When the Ginza cover trades in cuteness it is trading, in part, on a substrate the nervous system brought to the encounter.

What neuroscience establishes is therefore the reality of the satisfaction, and this strengthens, rather than weakens, the strongest version of the good cycle. The participants are not deluded; their reward systems are genuinely engaged; the bond that forms is underwritten by the same machinery that underwrites attachments no one would dream of calling unjust. But the limit of the framework is as sharp as its contribution, and it is the most important negative result in this paper. Neural reality is not justice. A cycle can be completely real in the reward and attachment systems of everyone inside it and still be forged at the level of structure, sustained by an extraction those reward systems have no way of registering. The nervous system reports that the satisfaction is occurring. It does not and cannot report where the conditions of that satisfaction were manufactured

or at whose expense. Any argument that moves from *they are genuinely happy* to *the cycle is therefore good* commits precisely the error this subsection forbids. The happiness is genuine. The inference is not licensed.

It is worth registering, without overstating, the temporal structure that the reward literature suggests, because it bears directly on why the cycle renews rather than terminates. The dopaminergic system, on the dominant reading, tracks not the receipt of a reward so much as the prediction and the anticipation of it, the gap between expectation and outcome, with the strongest signal at the moment of anticipated rather than consummated reward. If this is even approximately right, then the neural substrate is not a substrate of satisfaction in the sense of a deficit filled and quieted, but a substrate of wanting, of the lean toward a reward not yet had. This is a striking convergence with the psychoanalytic account, arrived at from an entirely independent direction and in an entirely different vocabulary: the structure that keeps the cycle turning is, at the level of the reward system as at the level of desire, a structure of the not-yet, of an anticipation that the having does not extinguish. I draw the convergence cautiously, as a resonance between two frameworks and not as a reduction of either to the other, which would violate the method. But the resonance is instructive. It suggests that the endlessness of the sweet cycle is overdetermined, written into the subject at more than one level, and therefore that any practice hoping to make the cycle good cannot proceed by trying to abolish the wanting, which is constitutive, but only by altering what the wanting is harnessed to and at whose expense it is fed.

The limit must then be stated once more in its sharpest form, because it is the hinge on which the paper's later refusal of an easy verdict turns. That a satisfaction is real in the nervous system, that it is overdetermined, ancient, and shared with attachments beyond reproach, settles nothing whatever about justice. A forged cycle does not feel forged. It feels, to the reward and attachment systems of those inside it, exactly as a genuine cycle feels, because those systems are reporting on the satisfaction and not on its conditions, and the conditions are precisely what the forgery hides. This is why no amount of evidence that participants flourish subjectively can establish that a cycle is just, and why the appeal to felt happiness, however sincerely advanced, is structurally incapable of answering the question the Ginza cover raised. Neuroscience, having confirmed the

happiness with more authority than any other framework, is for that very reason the framework that most firmly closes off happiness as a route to the verdict.

3.4.3 The Ethics of Care

The ethics of care arrives at the sweet cycle from a direction that both psychoanalysis and political economy tend to foreclose, and it begins by refusing a prejudice the others smuggle in. In the tradition that runs through Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, dependence is not the opposite of maturity and not a deficiency to be outgrown. The autonomous, self-sufficient agent of liberal moral theory is, on this view, a fiction that has systematically devalued the relational capacities, receptivity, responsiveness, the willingness to be relied upon and to rely, on which every actual human life depends. Read through this lens, *amai* is not a regression to be diagnosed but a competence to be recognized. To be able to presume upon another's indulgence, and to be able to welcome that presumption, is to be skilled in a grammar of relation that a culture of self-sufficiency has taught us to disparage. The care ethicist can therefore see what the political economist, intent on the hidden labor, is liable to miss: that inside the cycle, persons may be genuinely tending one another, answering one another's address, treating one another as ends.

The framework's question is accordingly its own, neither the analyst's nor the economist's. It asks whether, within the relation, persons are met and responded to, or merely used. And it can return a verdict that the other frameworks cannot reach: that a sweet cycle may be, in the conduct of the parties to one another, ethically nourishing, a real practice of mutual care, even as the same cycle is something else again when viewed from the standpoint of what sustains it. This is the first appearance of a fracture that will organize much of what follows, the possibility that a cycle is ethically good in the treatment of those within it and unjust in the structure that feeds it. The ethics of care holds one side of that fracture open and insists it not be closed prematurely. What it cannot do, and does not pretend to do, is see across the relation to the chain of production and reproduction that supplies the relation its means. For that we need the framework that looks hardest at exactly what care, attending to the face before it, tends not to see.

The fracture deserves to be named precisely, because it is easy to mistake for a contradiction to be resolved when it is in fact a feature to be preserved. It is entirely coherent,

and indeed common, for a relation to be ethically good in the care of its members and unjust in its structural conditions, and the two assessments do not cancel because they are assessments of different things. The ethics of care assesses the relation as a relation: are these two people responsive to one another, do they treat one another as ends, is there genuine tending here. Justice, as the later sections will deploy it, assesses the relation as a node in a wider system: what sustains this tending, who bears its costs, where does its surplus come from. A relation can score high on the first and low on the second, and when it does, the right description is not that the care was illusory but that the care was real and was, at the same time, underwritten by an injustice the carers did not see and did not choose. This is not a comfortable result, because it denies us the satisfaction of a single coherent judgment, but it is the truthful one, and the ethics of care earns its place in the inquiry precisely by defending the reality of the care against a critique that, left unchecked, would explain it away. The economist is right that there is an extraction. The care ethicist is right that there is genuine care. The mistake would be to think that one of them must therefore be wrong.

3.4.4 Structuralism and Linguistics

The structuralist tradition, descending from Saussure through Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, approaches *amai* not as a feeling or a transaction but as a position within a system of signs, and it sees, more clearly than any other framework, that sweetness has no meaning in itself but only by its difference from what it is not. To be cute is to occupy a marked term in an opposition: cute against cool, soft against hard, the one who is indulged against the one who provides. The structuralist insight is that the sweet object signifies nothing intrinsically; it signifies sweetness only within a code that assigns it that value by contrast, and the code, not the object, is the bearer of meaning. This is why the same gesture can read as charming in one system and as cloying or manipulative in another, and why the magazine cover can confer a meaning, justice, upon sweetness simply by placing the two terms in apposition within a signifying frame. Barthes would recognize the cover at once as a myth in his technical sense, a second-order signification in which a sign already complete, sweetness, is made the signifier of a further concept, justice, so that a cultural and contestable association is naturalized into an apparent identity. The structuralist can thus say something the others cannot: that the cover's proposition operates by enlisting

a whole differential system, and that its persuasiveness is the persuasiveness of a code that has made its contingent associations feel like nature.

But the structuralist framework reaches its limit at exactly the point the inquiry most needs, and it reaches it for a principled reason. A system of differences has no normative dimension internal to it. Structuralism can map how sweetness comes to mean, can lay bare the oppositions and the mythological operation, but it cannot say whether the system is just, because justice is not a relation of difference within a code but a relation among persons that the code may serve or betray. The structuralist brackets the referent and the subject by method, attending only to the play of signs, and in bracketing them it brackets precisely the labor, the bodies, and the costs that the question of justice must count. Structuralism shows the cover to be a myth; it cannot, from its own resources, say that the myth conceals an extraction, because the concealed is by definition what the system of signs does not contain. It hands the inquiry a precise account of how meaning is made and a principled silence about whether the meaning is paid for honestly.

3.4.5 Dialectics

A dialectical reading, in the line of Hegel and Marx, sees in the sweet cycle neither a stable good nor a simple fraud but a process driven by its own internal contradiction. The cycle is not one thing that is then judged; it is a movement in which the good and the forged are two moments of a single unfolding. The very feature that makes the cycle nourishing, that it keeps lack in operation and so keeps the relation alive, is the same feature that opens it to colonization, and the dialectician insists that these are not two facts but one, the positive and negative faces of a single determination. The recognition that deepens the bond and the consumption that deepens the dependence advance together; the cycle develops by intensifying the contradiction it carries, until what presented itself as pure mutual flourishing reveals the extraction it always contained, and the revelation is not the arrival of new information but the working-out of what was implicit from the start. Dialectics can therefore say what the static frameworks cannot: that the sweet cycle is not accidentally both good and forged but necessarily so, that its goodness and its forgery generate each other, and that any practice hoping to redeem it must work through the contradiction rather than wish it away.

Yet dialectics carries a danger that this paper must name rather than ignore, and the danger is peculiarly sharp here because it strikes at the paper's own method. The Hegelian form of dialectic tends toward sublation, toward an *Aufhebung* in which the contradiction is resolved at a higher level and gathered into a totality that comprehends it. That movement is precisely the synthesis the paper has forsworn. A dialectics that promised to lift the sweet cycle's contradictions into a reconciling whole would be offering exactly the master framework, the single currency of comprehension, that the method refuses. So dialectics enters the inquiry under a double sign: it is indispensable for seeing that the good and the forged are internally related and self-moving, and it is to be resisted at the moment it offers to complete that insight in a totalizing synthesis. The paper takes the dialectical perception of contradiction and declines the dialectical promise of its resolution, keeping the negative, the unresolved, open. This is itself a quarrel internal to the dialectical tradition, between a Hegelian closure and the negative dialectics that, with Adorno, refuses the consoling whole, and the paper stands, here, with the refusal.

3.4.6 Kantian Ethics

Kantian ethics brings to the sweet cycle the most exacting and least sentimental of the moral questions, the question of whether anyone within it or beyond it is treated merely as a means. The formula of humanity, that one must act so as to treat humanity, whether in one's own person or in that of another, never merely as a means but always also as an end, gives a sharp instrument precisely where the ethics of care is most indulgent. Where the care ethicist asks whether persons are tended, the Kantian asks a harder question that tending alone does not answer: whether the one who is tended, and the one who tends, and above all the ones across the cycle's edge who make its objects and bear its costs, are each treated as ends in themselves or used as instruments for an end that is not theirs. By this test the inner relation may pass, for the indulged and the indulgent may well regard each other as ends. But the production worker whose labor is externalized, and the self whose unwaged self-fashioning is consumed as if it were leisure, are treated, in the cycle as organized, very largely as means, as the instruments through which others' sweetness is supplied, counted in none of the ends the cycle serves. The Kantian thus arrives, by a wholly deontological route that owes nothing to the political economy, at the same edge the economist found, and the convergence is significant: two frameworks

that share no premises locate the wrong in the same place, the reduction of persons to fuel.

The limit of the Kantian framework is the obverse of its strength, and it is the same formalism that makes it powerful. The categorical imperative abstracts from all particularity to reach a universal law, and in doing so it is constitutively ill-suited to a phenomenon as culturally specific and as relationally textured as *amai*. Its universality cannot easily accommodate the claim, which the ethics of care and the later cultural section both press, that dependence and the licensed reliance of *amai* are goods whose meaning is internal to a particular form of relation and a particular culture, not derivable from a law that would hold for all rational beings as such. The Kantian is liable to read *amai* either as morally indifferent, a mere inclination, or as suspect, a heteronomy of the will before another's desire, and in both readings it misses what the care ethicist insists is really there, a competence and a good. So Kantian ethics and the ethics of care, both moral frameworks, are themselves incommensurable, the one demanding universality and autonomy, the other defending particularity and dependence, and the sweet cycle is a case where they genuinely disagree. The paper does not adjudicate between them. It records that the deontological eye sees the instrumentalization at the edge with unmatched clarity and is, for the same reason, partly blind to the relational good at the center.

3.5. The Epistemology of Formal Tools: Formalizing the Cycle and the Limits of Formalization

The frameworks of the previous section were substantive: each delivered a reading of *amai* in a currency of its own, desire, neural event, care, difference, contradiction, the maxim. This section turns to instruments of a different kind. Dynamical systems, generative grammar, field theory, category theory, game theory, and information theory do not, in the first instance, tell us whether the sweet cycle is good. They offer formal languages in which the structure of the cycle can be written down with precision. Their inclusion is not ornamental. A recurring claim of this paper is that the difference between a genuine and a forged cycle is a difference of structure, and structure is exactly what formal tools are built to capture. But the section has a second and equally important purpose, which is to show that each formal tool, in capturing the cycle, must make a choice about what

to include in its representation and what to leave out, and that this choice is itself a drawing of a boundary. The formal tools are therefore not the view from nowhere that would settle from above what the substantive frameworks could not. They are themselves situated, each seeing the cycle through the particular abstraction it imposes, and the limit of each is as instructive as its reach. The reflexive lesson, stated once here and returned to at the section's close, is that to formalize is already to choose a boundary, and the choice of boundary is, as the political economy will insist, the very thing on which the judgment of the cycle turns.

3.5.1 Dynamical Systems

The most natural formalization treats the sweet cycle as a trajectory in a state space. Let the state of the relation at a given time be a point whose coordinates record the relevant quantities, the strength of the bond, the level of accumulated recognition, the intensity of felt lack, the rate of consumption, and let the cycle be the evolution of this point under a dynamics. In these terms the distinctions the paper has drawn acquire sharp images. A merely circulating cycle is a closed orbit, a limit cycle that returns to the same loop period after period with nothing gained. A genuinely generative cycle is a spiral that climbs, an orbit whose return is to a higher value of the bond than the one it left, drawn by an attractor that the system's own internal dynamics sustain. A forged cycle is the subtle and important case: it too may climb, but it climbs only because it is driven by an external input, a flow of energy or value across the boundary of the system, and is in the language of dynamics a dissipative structure, an order maintained at the expense of a throughput it does not itself generate. Cut the external input and the forged spiral collapses, whereas a genuine attractor persists on its own. This gives the forged-genuine distinction a precise dynamical signature: the genuine cycle is autonomous in the technical sense, sustained by its own vector field, while the forged cycle is non-autonomous, its apparent self-organization parasitic on a driving term from outside.

The limit of the dynamical formalization is the choice it cannot itself justify, and it is the choice of state variables. To write the dynamics one must first decide which quantities count as coordinates of the state, and that decision determines in advance what the model can see. Include only the bond, the recognition, and the consumption of the visible dyad, and the model will show a self-sustaining attractor, a genuine cycle, because the external

streams that drive it have been omitted from the state space and reappear, if at all, only as unmodeled constants. Include the production labor, the unwaged self-fashioning, and the manufactured lack as state variables, and the same cycle reveals its driven, dissipative character. The dynamics does not choose its own state space; the modeler does, and the modeler's choice of what to include is precisely the drawing of the boundary whose stakes the political economy will make explicit. Dynamical systems thus offer an exact language for the distinction between autonomous and driven cycles and, in the same gesture, demonstrate that the distinction is only as honest as the state space is complete.

3.5.2 Generative Grammar

A second formalization treats *amai* as a generative system, a set of production rules whose recursive application yields the unbounded variety of sweet expressions, much as a grammar yields the unbounded sentences of a language from a finite rule set. On this view the cuteness the second section analyzed is not a fixed inventory of charming things but a generative capacity, a small set of rules, diminutive forms, softened contours, marks of the unfinished and the appealing, that can be applied again and again to produce always new instances. The framework illuminates two features of the cycle with particular force. The first is its productivity: like a grammar, the sweet system can generate expressions it has never produced before, which is why the cycle never exhausts its repertoire and why consumption can always find a new object. The second is more pointed. The second section observed that the cute holds lack open, that it solicits a response it does not complete, and in grammatical terms this corresponds to a derivation that never reaches a terminal symbol, a production that always rewrites into something further to be rewritten. The endlessness of the cycle is, in this language, the non-termination of a derivation, and the framework explains formally why a desire mediated by the cute renews rather than concludes: the grammar has no stop rule.

The limit here is that a grammar specifies what can be generated, not whether what is generated is just. A generative system is normatively silent by construction; it characterizes well-formedness, the rules by which a sweet expression is correctly produced, and well-formedness is not justice. The same grammar generates the sweet expressions of a genuinely co-created intimacy and the sweet expressions of a capital-dictated repertoire, and nothing in the grammar distinguishes them, because the distinction lies not in the

form of the derivations but in who authored the rules and at whose expense they are enacted, questions the formalism does not contain. Worse, and this is the framework's most useful self-disclosure, the choice of the rule set is itself prior to and outside the grammar. Whoever fixes the production rules fixes what sweetness can be, and the political economy's claim of real subsumption, that capital has reshaped the very grammar of *amai*, is in this language the claim that capital has come to author the rule set itself. The grammar can show the generativity and the non-termination; it cannot, from within, say whose grammar it is.

3.5.3 Field Theory

The formalization closest to the series' own prior work treats the relation as a field and the cycle as transport around a closed path within it. Assign to the space of relational states a connection, a rule for how value is carried from one state to an adjacent one, and the holonomy of the cycle is the net transformation that value undergoes when carried once around the closed loop and back to its starting configuration. A vanishing holonomy is the flat case, mere circulation with no net change. A genuine positive holonomy is a real curvature of the relational field, an accumulation that the geometry itself produces, the formal counterpart of the spiral that climbs on its own. The forged holonomy, the paper's central diagnosis, acquires here its most exact definition: it is a phase that appears around the loop but is sourced from outside the region the loop encloses, a holonomy that is not the integral of an internal curvature but the trace of a flux entering across the boundary. This is the technical sense, developed in the author's work on geometric phase, in which the sweet cycle's apparent accumulation can be at once observable around the loop and absent as internal curvature, present as phase and forged as generation.

The limit of the field formalization is the one most worth stating, because the framework is the paper's own and the temptation to trust it as a master language is correspondingly strong. A field theory requires a choice of background and a choice of gauge. One must fix what counts as the space of states, what the connection is, and relative to what the phase is measured, and these choices are not delivered by the formalism; they are imposed on it. A holonomy is always a holonomy relative to a connection and a region, and to declare a cycle's holonomy positive or forged is already to have fixed the region the loop encloses, which is to say, once more, to have drawn the boundary. The field theory gives

the forged holonomy a real and precise definition and simultaneously shows that the definition presupposes a boundary choice it cannot itself make. Even the paper's own most powerful formal instrument is, in this exact sense, not a view from nowhere.

3.5.4 Category Theory

Category theory shifts attention from objects to the structure-preserving maps between them, and it offers a language for the relations among the very frameworks this paper refuses to synthesize. One may regard each framework as a category, its objects the states of the cycle as that framework conceives them, its morphisms the transformations the framework recognizes, and one may then ask whether there exist functors, structure-preserving translations, between them. The categorial insight is twofold and cuts in both directions. On one side, a functor that faithfully carried the psychoanalytic category into the economic one, or the ethical into the dynamical, would be exactly the synthesis the paper denies is available; the absence of such faithful functors is the formal expression of incommensurability, the claim that there is no translation that preserves all the structure each framework sees. On the other side, category theory warns against a too-easy pluralism, for it also studies how partial translations, adjunctions and natural transformations, can relate frameworks without collapsing them, capturing the sense in which the frameworks are about the same cycle without being reducible to one another. The framework thus formalizes the paper's own methodological stance: many categories, no master functor, but structured relations among them all the same.

The limit is that category theory describes the form of relations among frameworks while remaining empty of their content, and in particular it cannot itself certify that any proposed functor is faithful or that any incommensurability is genuine rather than apparent. To assert that there is no master framework is, in categorial dress, to assert the non-existence of a certain functor, and that non-existence is not a theorem the formalism proves but a substantive claim about the frameworks that the formalism only lets us state cleanly. The danger, peculiar to this most abstract of tools, is to mistake having named the structure of incommensurability for having established it. Category theory gives the paper its sharpest way of saying what it means by incommensurable frameworks with structured relations; it does not relieve the paper of arguing, framework by framework, that the incommensurability is real.

3.5.5 Game Theory

Game theory models the sweet cycle as strategic interaction among agents each pursuing an outcome, and it captures with precision a dimension the other tools pass over, the dimension of incentive and equilibrium. Cast the firm, the indulged, and the indulgent as players with payoffs, and the cycle appears as a repeated game whose recurrence is explained by its being, in some range, an equilibrium: each party, given the others' strategies, does best by continuing. The framework explains formally why the cycle is stable without anyone intending its stability, why it persists as if by design though no one designed it, and it gives a precise content to the manufactured lack of the political economy, namely a deliberate alteration of the payoff structure by a party, the firm, that profits from keeping the others playing. The contemporary platform, analyzed earlier as a third party that accelerates the cycle, is in this language a player that designs the game others play, setting the payoffs so that the engagement it harvests is the equilibrium behavior of the rest. Game theory can even represent the forged character of the cycle as a negative externality: an equilibrium among the visible players that is sustained by imposing uncompensated costs on parties who are not at the table and whose payoffs the game, as drawn, does not include.

The limit, once again, is the boundary, and game theory makes it unusually visible because the boundary is literally the specification of who counts as a player. A game must fix its set of players, and whoever is left out of that set is, by construction, a party whose welfare the equilibrium analysis does not weigh, an externality at best. Draw the player set as the visible dyad and the firm, and the cycle is a benign equilibrium of mutual benefit. Admit the production worker and the bearer of manufactured anxiety as players, and the equilibrium is revealed as one sustained by externalized costs, a solution that is stable only because the losers have no seat. The choice of the player set is the drawing of the boundary in the most literal form the paper will encounter, and game theory, in requiring that choice before it can compute anything, demonstrates yet again that the formal verdict is hostage to a prior and non-formal decision about who is admitted to the reckoning.

3.5.6 Information Theory

Information theory offers a last formalization, treating the sweet cycle as a channel along which a signal, the confirmation of being wanted, is transmitted from one party to another through the medium of the object. The framework lights up the second section's analysis of the demand for love from an unexpected angle. What the indulged party seeks is, in these terms, a reduction of uncertainty about the other's desire, a signal that lowers the entropy of the question *am I still wanted*, and the cute object functions as a carrier of that signal. The endlessness of the cycle becomes legible as a property of a channel in which the uncertainty is never fully resolved, in which each message reduces the doubt only partially and the doubt regenerates, so that the channel must carry the signal again. The framework also gives a precise way to state what capital does: it inserts itself as the owner of the channel, charging for the transmission of a signal that once passed freely, and it can even degrade the channel deliberately, manufacturing noise, the produced sense of insufficiency, so that more messages, more purchases, are required to achieve the same reduction of uncertainty. The manufactured lack is, in this language, manufactured entropy, noise introduced into the channel to increase the volume of paid transmission needed to overcome it.

The limit of the information-theoretic picture is that it measures quantity of information and says nothing of its worth. A channel's capacity, its noise, its rate are all definable without any reference to whether the signal transmitted is true, whether the reassurance carried is honest, or whether the channel is justly owned. Information theory can model the reduction of uncertainty about being wanted and remain wholly indifferent to whether one is in fact wanted or merely told so, and it can model the manufactured noise without judging the manufacture. As with every tool in this section, the formalism requires a prior choice, here of what counts as signal and what as noise, and that choice is not innocent: to classify the produced sense of insufficiency as noise is already a normative judgment that the formalism borrows from outside itself, for from a purely information-theoretic standpoint the manufactured anxiety is simply more signal in a different channel, the channel of the market. The tool measures the flow and is silent on its justice and its truth.

3.5.7 The Reflexive Lesson: Formalization Is a Choice of Boundary

A pattern has repeated across all six tools, and it is the reason this section belongs in a paper about justice rather than in a technical appendix. Each formal instrument captured something the substantive frameworks could not state with comparable precision: the dynamical signature of a driven versus an autonomous cycle, the non-termination of the cute derivation, the exact definition of a forged holonomy, the structural meaning of incommensurability, the equilibrium logic of stability and externality, the entropic account of manufactured lack. And each, at the point of its greatest precision, disclosed that its precision rested on a prior choice that the formalism itself could not make: the choice of state variables, of rule set, of background and gauge, of which functors to admit, of who counts as a player, of what counts as signal. In every case the choice was, in substance, the drawing of a boundary, a decision about what the representation includes and what it consigns to the outside.

This is the reflexive lesson, and it closes the loop with the rest of the paper. The political economy will argue that the judgment of the cycle turns on where the boundary is drawn and who is allowed to fall outside it. The formal tools, far from supplying a boundary-free vantage from which that judgment could be made objectively, are revealed to be themselves so many ways of drawing the boundary, each making its cut and computing its verdict relative to the cut it made. There is no formalization that is not a framing, and no framing that does not include and exclude. This does not make the formal tools worthless; it makes them honest, once their boundary choices are made explicit, and it forbids the particular error of treating any of them as the master language that would adjudicate from above what the substantive frameworks left open. The most rigorous instruments in the paper turn out to confirm, rather than escape, its central methodological claim: that the goodness of a cycle that looks good is decided differently depending on where one draws the line, and that drawing the line is an act for which no formalism can be held responsible in place of the one who draws it.

3.6. Political Economy: How Capital Produces, Reproduces, and Extracts from Amai

The frameworks gathered so far have established that the satisfactions of the sweet cycle are structurally intelligible, neurally real, and, within the relation, capable of being a genuine practice of care. None of them has been able to say whether the cycle is just, and two of them, psychoanalysis and neuroscience, have explicitly declined the question as outside their competence. This section takes up the question they decline. Its thesis is that the sweet cycle, viewed at the scale at which value is produced and reproduced, is not a closed loop that generates its own surplus but an open system that imports its surplus from outside while presenting itself as closed, and that this importation, hidden by the very framing the cycle invites, is extraction in the precise sense the series has developed.

The analysis proceeds in three layers, each deeper than the last. The first is the classical analysis of surplus and social reproduction, which locates where the cycle's value is drawn from. The second is a philosophical analysis in the Marxian tradition, which asks what the cycle does to the persons caught in it, through the categories of alienation, fetishism, subsumption, reification, and ideology. The third is an analysis in the idiom of contemporary political economy, which asks what becomes of the cycle once it is organized by emotional capitalism, by platforms and the attention economy, by the aesthetic economy, and by the rentier logic that increasingly governs accumulation. The three layers are not rivals; each sees what the others cannot, and together they show that the diagnosis of a forged holonomy is not the verdict of a single school but a conclusion reached, by different routes, from several.

3.6.1 The Mechanism, Stated Plainly

Before the layers, the central mechanism deserves to be stated in one place and at its full sharpness, because it is the spine on which everything in this section hangs and it is more precise, and more damning, than the familiar charge that capital manufactures false desires. That familiar charge is weak, because it presupposes a contrast with some catalogue of true desires by which the false ones could be exposed, and no such catalogue

survives scrutiny: the wish for a small bright thing is no more counterfeit than the wish for bread. The mechanism this paper describes does not depend on any such contrast and is the stronger for it. What capital has done is not to fabricate a desire that was not there. It is to discover a structural truth about desire as such, the truth the second section reconstructed, that a living relation is sustained not by satisfaction but by a lack kept in operation, with the cute serving as the cultural mediation through which that lack is approached without being filled, and then to occupy the position that truth defines. The move has three beats. First, capital inserts its commodity into the place where the mediation of lack already does its work, so that the recognition which formerly flowed through a glance or a word must now flow through a purchase. Second, because the mediation of lack is by its nature unclosable, the openness that makes the relation alive, the purchasing it now carries is likewise unclosable, and the cycle renews without end not because anyone is addicted but because the structure of desire was never going to terminate. Capital does not need to manufacture endlessness; it inherits it from the form it has occupied. Third, and most consequentially, capital does not merely occupy the lack but enlarges its production, reproducing on a widening scale the sense of not yet being sweet enough, because the manufactured insufficiency is the fuel the cycle burns. The very feature that the reconstruction identified as the condition of a living relation, the persistence of lack, is thus taken over, industrialized, and made to yield a surplus.

The paradox that the prologue felt at the magazine cover is now explicable, and it is the heart of the matter. The cycle looks just precisely because it is built upon a real and nourishing structure rather than upon a deception. The satisfactions are genuine, as the neuroscience confirmed; the care is genuine, as the ethics of care insisted; the mediation of lack really is keeping the relation alive. The cover's claim that sweetness is justice is therefore not a simple lie that a sharper eye would see through, because within the cycle's own boundary it is, in part, true. This is exactly why the critique cannot proceed by unmasking a falsehood. It must proceed by widening the boundary, by following the value across the edge the cycle prefers we not cross, and asking whether the surplus that circulates so warmly within was generated within or drawn in from a labor and a lack kept just out of frame. The genius of the arrangement, and the reason it can wear the name of justice without obvious absurdity, is that it has wrapped a genuine intimacy around an extraction so that the two present a single sweet face. The work of the analysis that

follows is to show that the face has a hidden side, and to say precisely whose labor and whose manufactured want are kept there.

3.6.2 The Classical Layer: Surplus, Social Reproduction, and the Forged Holonomy

The classical analysis proceeds in four movements. The first movement concerns the commodity mediation of a demand that is not, in itself, a commodity. What the indulged party seeks, the earlier sections established, is the confirmation of being wanted, a demand for love that operates in the register of the symbolic and cannot be directly bought or sold. Capital's operation is to insert a commodity into the path of that demand. The cosmetic, the accessory, the small sweet thing becomes the necessary mediation through which the confirmation is sought and given. A circuit that in itself runs on recognition is thereby rewritten as a circuit that runs on purchase. In the series' shorthand, a demand D is routed through a commodity C , and what had been an exchange of recognition becomes a movement of money through goods and back to money enlarged, the form the series has written as $M-C-M'$. The crucial point is that this rewriting is not a neutral convenience. It makes the continuation of the recognition depend on the continuation of the purchasing, and it is from that dependence that everything else follows.

The second movement asks where the surplus comes from, and it is here that the analysis must be most concrete, because the difference between a genuine and a forged cycle is nothing other than the answer to this question. If the surplus that the cycle accumulates, the deepened bond and the firm's enlarged M' , were generated entirely within the loop by the participants' own exchange, the cycle would be genuine. It is not generated entirely within the loop. At least three streams of value flow into the cycle from across its edge, and all three are systematically rendered invisible by the framing that lets the cycle look closed. The first is the labor of the production chain, the making of the cosmetics and the garments, frequently performed far from the site of consumption, frequently by women, under conditions the sweet cycle never has to see. The second, and the one this paper most wants to make visible, is the reproductive labor that the indulged party performs upon themselves, the work of producing and maintaining the very image of being worth indulging, the time, money, attention, and self-management that go into being sweet. This labor is unwaged, and more than unwaged, it is naturalized as self-care and even as self-love, so that its character as labor disappears precisely in being praised. The third

stream is the manufactured lack itself. Capital does not find a fixed quantity of desire and serve it; it continually produces the sense of not yet being sweet enough, not yet indulgent enough, not yet worthy, because that produced insufficiency is the engine that keeps the purchasing in motion. Here the analysis rejoins the author's earlier work on lack: capital has discovered the structural truth that a relation runs on a lack kept in operation, and it has industrialized the production of that lack.

The second of these three streams repays a closer look, because it is the one most thoroughly hidden and the one the present series is best positioned to make visible. The work of producing oneself as worth indulging, the maintenance of the sweet self, belongs to the broad category that feminist political economy has taught us to call social reproduction: the vast, largely unwaged, largely feminized labor of producing and maintaining the persons who then appear in the waged economy as if already made. Nancy Fraser's formulation is useful here, that capital depends upon conditions of social reproduction which it does not pay for and indeed tends to erode, consuming the very care and relational capacity that it presupposes. The sweet cycle is a precise instance of this larger structure. The capacity to be sweet, to present an appealing and indulgible self, does not arise from nowhere; it is produced and continually reproduced by labor, and that labor is performed off the books, by the indulged party upon themselves, in hours that no wage counts and that the culture reclassifies as leisure, pleasure, or self-love. The genius of the arrangement, from capital's standpoint, is that the reproductive labor on which the cycle depends is not merely unpaid but is experienced by the one performing it as a gift to herself, so that the extraction is felt as indulgence and the cost as a treat. There is no clearer case of what it means for an extraction to be hidden by the very framing that the commodity supplies, and it is no accident that the framing the *Ginza* cover supplies is, precisely, that this labor is justice.

The third stream, the manufactured lack, completes the picture and connects the political economy back to the psychoanalysis. The earlier sections established that desire runs on a lack kept open, and insisted that this openness is in itself the condition of a living relation rather than a defect. The political economy adds the decisive observation that this openness is a resource which capital has learned to manufacture and to enlarge. The produced sense of insufficiency, of not yet being sweet enough, is not a byproduct of the

cycle but its fuel, deliberately generated because a satisfied subject buys nothing. What capital exploits is therefore not a contingent insecurity that better marketing happened to create, but the structural openness of desire itself, harnessed and amplified into a permanent and expanding demand. This is why the critique cannot end by recommending that people simply feel more secure, as though the manufactured lack were a correctable error rather than the operating principle of the arrangement. The lack is doing exactly what it is built to do.

The third movement names the result, and the name is one the series has prepared. A cycle whose inner surplus is sustained by streams of value drawn from across its edge, while it presents itself as a closed loop generating its own surplus, is a forged holonomy. The positive accumulation that the strongest version of the good cycle correctly perceived is real as an appearance and false as an accounting, because the books were balanced only by leaving the external streams off them. Let the boundary be drawn where the strongest version drew it, around the firm, the indulged, and the indulgent, and the surplus reads as positive, value generated and returned to its generators. Let the boundary be drawn wide enough to include the production worker, the unwaged reproductive labor of self-fashioning, and the manufactured anxiety, and the sign of the surplus is no longer obviously positive, because some of what the inner parties enjoy is not generated by their exchange but transferred into it from those who bear its costs and are counted in none of its benefits. In the series' terms, the difference between a genuine and a forged cycle is the difference between a closed system that accumulates a real internal holonomy and an open system that fakes one by extraction, and the sweet cycle, at the scale of its production and reproduction, exhibits the second form. This is the same diagnosis the series has applied to the general formula of capital, now made specific to the intimate register, where it is harder to see and therefore more worth seeing.

It may help to state the diagnosis in the more quantitative idiom the series uses elsewhere, while being honest about what the idiom can and cannot deliver in a case like this. The series writes the net value a cycle accumulates over a traversal as the difference between what it generates and what it consumes, a quantity whose sign distinguishes a genuinely accumulating cycle from a merely circulating or a depleting one. The crucial subtlety, and the whole point of the forged-holonomy diagnosis, is that this quantity is not boundary-

independent: its sign depends on where the edge of the cycle is drawn, because the drawing of the edge determines which generative contributions and which consumptive costs are counted. Drawn narrowly, around the visible participants, the sweet cycle shows a clearly positive net, much is generated and little consumed, because the largest costs, the production labor, the unwaged self-fashioning, the manufactured anxiety, fall outside the boundary and are not entered on the ledger. Drawn widely, to include those costs, the net is no longer reliably positive, because much of what appeared as internally generated value is revealed as value transferred in from across the edge. I do not pretend that this quantity can be measured in any precise empirical sense for a phenomenon as diffuse as *amai*; the point of writing it is not to compute it but to make visible that the appearance of a positive holonomy is an artifact of a boundary choice, and that the boundary choice is precisely what the cycle's self-presentation is designed to naturalize. The forged cycle is, in this exact sense, a cycle whose positive sign survives only so long as the accounting refuses to widen.

The fourth movement observes that the cycle does not merely repeat but expands, and that its expansion is its most telling feature. Each turn of the sweet cycle does more than strengthen the bond; it trains the participants to bind recognition more tightly to consumption, so that the next confirmation of being wanted requires a little more than the last. The lack that capital produces is not produced once but reproduced on an enlarging scale, and the recognition that was once available through a small mediation comes to require a larger one. This is the intimate form of accumulation, M' greater than M carried not by the firm's ledger alone but by the deepening dependence of recognition upon purchase. And it is exactly here that the forged cycle reveals its difference from a genuinely generative one. A genuinely good cycle, in the sense the series has defended, would accumulate its positive holonomy internally and would not need to draw an ever-larger tribute from outside to do so; its spiral would climb on its own generated value. The sweet cycle climbs, when it climbs, by reaching further across its edge each time. The expansion that looks from inside like a deepening love is, at the scale of the system, a widening extraction. To say this is not to say that no one inside is really in love. It is to say that the love and the extraction are, in the forged cycle, running on the same track, and that the work of the practical sections later in this paper will be to ask whether they can be pulled apart.

3.6.3 The Philosophical Layer: Alienation, Fetishism, Subsumption, Reification, Ideology

The classical layer locates where the value is drawn from. It does not yet say what the cycle does to the persons who live inside it, and for that the analysis must move from Marx's economics to his philosophy, and to the tradition that extended it. Five categories are needed, each illuminating a different facet of what the sweet cycle does to subjectivity itself. They are not loose metaphors borrowed for color; they are precise concepts, and the sweet cycle turns out to be an unusually clean instance of each.

The first is alienation, in the sense of the early Marx of the 1844 manuscripts, where the worker's own product confronts her as an alien power standing over against her and governing her. The sweet cycle produces an intimate variant of exactly this. What the indulged party produces, through the unwaged labor of self-fashioning, is an image of the sweet self, and that image, once produced, confronts her as something she must continually live up to, an alien standard that governs her rather than a free expression that she governs. She does not possess the sweet self; the sweet self possesses her, dictating what must be bought, maintained, performed, and renewed. The product of her labor has become a power over her. This is alienation in the strict sense, and it connects directly to the imaginary capture diagnosed in the second section: the image that the imaginary fixes is precisely the alienated product, the self externalized into a picture that then commands its original. The classical concept and the psychoanalytic one name, from two directions, a single structure.

The second is commodity fetishism, in the sense of the first volume of *Capital*, where a definite social relation between people assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things. The sweet cycle is fetishistic to its core. The relation between the indulged and the indulgent, and behind them the relation between the consumer and the distant workers who made the objects, appears in the cycle as a relation between a person and her possessions, between a self and the bright things that make it sweet. The social relations, the labor of the production chain, the reproductive labor of self-fashioning, vanish into the object and reappear as a property of the object itself, its sweetness, its cuteness, its power to charm. The Ginza cover is the perfect fetishistic formula. To say that sweetness is justice is to attribute to a commodity, to the quality of the sweet thing, a predicate,

justice, that properly belongs to a social relation among persons. The fetish does not merely hide the social relation; it relocates its qualities into the thing, so that one seeks in the object what can only be found in the relation. This is why the cycle can feel like the pursuit of justice while being the consumption of goods: the fetish has lodged the social predicate in the commodity.

The third is the distinction between formal and real subsumption, from the unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital*. Capital formally subsumes a labor process when it takes over a process that already existed and sets it to producing surplus without changing its inner form; it really subsumes that process when it reshapes the process itself to its own requirements, remaking the activity from within. The sweet cycle is a case of real subsumption reaching into the intimate sphere. Capital did not merely find an existing practice of *amai* and attach commodities to it, which would be formal subsumption. It has reshaped *amai* itself, remade what it is to be sweet, to be indulged, to charm and be charmed, around the commodity form, so that the very grammar of intimate reliance now bears the impress of what must be bought to enact it. The standard of sweetness, the tempo of its renewal, the forms it may take, are increasingly dictated by the commodity system rather than by the relation. Intimacy has not merely been monetized at its edges; it has been reorganized from within. This is the deepest sense in which the cycle is not a natural phenomenon that capital exploits but a phenomenon that capital has, in part, produced.

The fourth is reification, in Lukács's extension of fetishism, where the commodity form so saturates consciousness that relations, processes, and qualities that are living and dynamic come to be apprehended as fixed things. The sweet cycle reifies intimacy. *Amai* is a process, a continual mutual generation of recognition, a dynamic that lives only in its enactment. Under the commodity form it is frozen into a set of possessable things, the look, the items, the image, that can be acquired, displayed, and exchanged. The living dialectic of a relation that the second section described, the open question continually reposed, is congealed into an inventory. What was an activity becomes a stock. And because the reified form is what the market can sell, the market continually pulls the relation toward its reified version, toward the having of sweetness rather than the doing of it. Reification is the bridge between the fetishism of the object and the alienation

of the self: the relation is thingified, the self is thingified into its image, and both then circulate as commodities.

The fifth concerns ideology, and here the contemporary form of the critique, associated with Žižek, is sharper than the classical one. The classical theory of ideology held that the participants are deceived, that they do not know the real conditions of their activity and would withdraw if they did. But the sweet cycle is not sustained by ignorance. Many who participate know perfectly well that they are inside a consumerist apparatus, can articulate the critique, and continue all the same. This is the cynical structure Žižek described: they know very well what they are doing, but still they do it. Ideology here operates not at the level of knowledge but at the level of practice, in the fetish that is enacted regardless of what is known. The implication for this paper is important and is the reason the critique cannot rest on consciousness-raising alone. Telling the participants the truth about the cycle does not dissolve the cycle, because they were not held in it by a falsehood in the first place. They are held by a practice, by the lived dependence of recognition upon purchase, and a practice is not undone by being seen through. This is why the paper's constructive sections must speak of practices and not merely of awareness: only a changed practice answers a fetish enacted in spite of knowledge.

Taken together these five categories deliver a verdict the classical layer could not. The classical layer showed that the cycle extracts. The philosophical layer shows that it deforms: it alienates the self into an image that rules it, relocates the qualities of social relations into commodities, reshapes intimacy from within to the measure of the market, freezes a living relation into possessable things, and secures participation through a fetish that survives full knowledge. The extraction and the deformation are two aspects of one process, and neither alone is the whole of what is wrong.

3.6.4 The Contemporary Layer: Emotional, Platform, Aesthetic, and Rentier Capitalism

The categories so far are powerful but were forged for an industrial capitalism of factories and waged labor. The sweet cycle lives in a different economy, and four contemporary developments in political economy are needed to see how the old mechanism operates under new conditions. Each names a form of accumulation that the classical analysis did

not anticipate and that the sweet cycle exemplifies.

The first is emotional capitalism, in Eva Illouz's sense, the historical process by which emotional life and economic life have interpenetrated, so that emotions are made into objects of calculation, management, and exchange, while economic relations are saturated with the language of feeling. The sweet cycle is emotional capitalism in miniature. The demand for love that the second section placed at its center is, under emotional capitalism, recoded as something to be managed by consumption, optimized, invested in, and audited for its returns. The intimate question, am I still wanted, becomes a question with a purchasable answer and therefore a budget, a strategy, a portfolio of sweet things assembled to secure an emotional yield. What Illouz lets us see is that this is not a corruption of an otherwise pure emotional sphere by an external economic logic; the two have grown together, so that the very way the participants experience their longing is already shaped by the market that offers to satisfy it. The demand for love arrives pre-formatted for consumption.

The second is the platform and attention economy, and here the analysis must update its picture of where the sweet cycle now runs. The *Ginza* magazine cover is in a sense already an old medium. The contemporary sweet cycle runs substantially on platforms, where the cute self is performed for an audience and the performance is captured as data. Two extractions compound here. In the terms of Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism, the performance of the sweet self generates a behavioral surplus, a stream of data about attention, desire, and response that the platform appropriates and turns to account, so that the unwaged labor of self-fashioning now produces, in addition to the image, a raw material that is extracted at a second remove. And in the terms of the attention economy, attention itself is the scarce good, and the cute, which the second section showed to be a form that solicits response, is an unusually efficient instrument for capturing it. The platform is therefore not a neutral venue for the sweet cycle but an active party to it, engineering the cycle's renewal because the cycle produces the engagement the platform sells. The intimate dyad of the original analysis is now embedded in a triad whose third member, the platform, profits from the dyad's every turn and has every incentive to accelerate it.

The third is aesthetic capitalism, in Gernot Böhme's sense, the stage of accumulation in

which the production of use values gives way increasingly to the production of staging values, the value a commodity has in letting its owner stage an appearance, an atmosphere, a self. The sweet things of the cycle are aesthetic commodities par excellence. What they sell is not a use but a staging, the power to appear as the sweet self, to compose an atmosphere of indulgability. Böhme lets us name precisely what is consumed: not the cosmetic as pigment but the cosmetic as the means of staging a self worth charming. This connects the contemporary layer back to the reification of the philosophical layer and the imaginary capture of the psychoanalytic one, for the staging value is exactly the price of the alienated image. Aesthetic capitalism is the economic form whose product is the imaginary itself, sold by the unit.

The fourth is the rentier logic that, on a growing body of analysis, increasingly characterizes contemporary accumulation, the shift from profit earned by producing value to rent extracted by controlling an asset that others must pay to use. The relevant asset in the sweet cycle is the brand, and behind the brand the whole apparatus of signs, the cuteness, the names, the aesthetic codes, that the consumer must pay to deploy. The premium paid for the branded sweet thing over its cost of production is, in this light, not a return to value the firm created but a rent on a sign the firm controls, a charge for access to a vocabulary of sweetness that has been enclosed. The distinction, central to the work of writers such as Mazzucato on value creation versus value extraction, lets us sharpen the forged-holonomy diagnosis one final degree. To the extent the firm's enlarged M' is rent rather than profit, a charge for access to an enclosed sign rather than a return to generated value, the cycle is forged not only because it draws on external labor but because its central commercial party is extracting rather than creating, collecting a toll at a gate it has erected across the path of the demand for love. The enclosure of sweetness is the rentier moment of the sweet cycle.

These four contemporary forms do not replace the classical and philosophical analyses; they show those analyses operating under present conditions and intensified by them. Emotional capitalism preformats the demand, the platform extracts a second surplus from its performance and accelerates its renewal, aesthetic capitalism sells the staging of the alienated image, and rentier logic collects a toll on the enclosed signs through which all of this must pass. The sweet cycle of the Ginza cover, read through these four, is

revealed as a node in an accumulation regime far larger and more extractive than the intimate dyad it appears, from inside, to be.

3.6.5 A Caution on What the Diagnosis Does and Does Not Claim

I close this section with a caution the series requires of itself and which must not be omitted. To diagnose the sweet cycle as a forged holonomy is a structural claim, not a verdict on any person within it, and it does not by itself establish that the satisfactions are false or the care insincere. The earlier frameworks have already shown that they are neither. What the structural claim establishes is narrower and harder: that the goodness perceived from inside is, in the cycle as capital currently organizes it, underwritten from outside, and that an honest reckoning cannot stop at the satisfied faces in the frame. Whether a sweet cycle could be organized otherwise, so that its surplus were genuinely internal and no one across its edge were reduced to fuel, is not a question political economy can answer by critique alone. It is a question for practice, and the paper will reach it.

3.7. Feminism: Extraction, or a Stigmatized Capacity for Relation?

No framework divides against itself before the sweet cycle as feminism does, and the division is not a weakness to be resolved but the most instructive thing feminism has to offer this inquiry. The cycle presents feminism with a phenomenon that its two deepest commitments read in opposite directions, and holding both readings at full strength, rather than collapsing one into the other, is the discipline this section requires.

The first reading is the critical one, and it converges with the political economy just developed. *Amai* is not distributed evenly across persons; it falls along a gendered line. It is overwhelmingly women who are addressed by the Ginza cover, women who are enjoined to be sweet, cute, worth indulging, and women who perform the unwaged reproductive labor of producing that sweetness upon themselves. The critical tradition has a precise vocabulary for what is happening. The management of feeling and appearance to meet an external standard is labor, emotional labor in Arlie Hochschild's sense, performed continuously and counted nowhere. The standard of cuteness to which the labor is addressed is a disciplined femininity, a norm that produces the very subjects who then experience meeting it as their own desire. And the manufactured anxiety that drives the purchasing,

the produced sense of never being sweet enough, falls disproportionately on women as a continuous tax on self-worth. Read this way, the proposition that sweetness is justice is a near-perfect specimen of ideology: it confers the name of a virtue on a gendered extraction, so that the labor of being sweet is experienced not as a cost imposed but as a justice embraced. This reading is powerful and, within its scope, correct.

The critical reading has a further resource that sharpens it beyond the charge of mere unfairness, and it is worth drawing out because it connects the gendered analysis to the imaginary capture diagnosed in the second section. The femininity that the cycle rewards is not a pre-existing trait that the cycle happens to remunerate; it is, in significant part, produced by the repeated performance the cycle demands. The norm precedes the subject and shapes the desire through which the subject then experiences the norm as her own. This is why the appeal to the participant's felt willingness cannot settle the question in the cycle's favor. That a woman wants to be sweet, enjoys the small bright things, experiences the labor of self-fashioning as pleasure, is not evidence that the cycle is innocent, because the wanting, the enjoyment, and the experience of pleasure are themselves among the cycle's products. The critical reading thus reaches the same wall the neuroscience reached, from the other side: subjective endorsement, however sincere, cannot certify justice, because the endorsement is part of what the arrangement manufactures. Where the neuroscientist said that real happiness does not entail a just cycle, the feminist critic adds that the happiness may be the cycle's most effective instrument, the very means by which a gendered extraction secures the consent of those from whom it extracts.

This is the critical reading at full strength, and the temptation at this point is to take it as the conclusion. The section's discipline is to refuse that temptation, not by weakening the critique, which is sound as far as it reaches, but by insisting that it does not reach far enough, and that a second reading, equally feminist, sees something the first is structurally liable to miss.

The second reading refuses to let the first have the last word, and it does so on feminist grounds, not against them. To read *amai* solely as women being disciplined is to perform a familiar and suspect gesture, the gesture of denying women's agency in the name of protecting them, of treating what women do as something merely done to them. The ethics of care prepared the counter-reading: dependence, softness, the solicitation of

indulgence are not in themselves marks of subordination but capacities for relation that a culture organized around masculine-coded autonomy has taught us to despise. To presume upon another's care, and to do so deliberately, skillfully, even strategically, can be an exercise of power within a relation rather than a surrender of it. The one who is sweet is not always the one who is weak. There is a tradition of feminist thought, and there is a complexity specific to the Japanese context that resists any simple importation of an Anglophone narrative of disciplined femininity, that insists *amai* can be a competence women wield, a register in which they act, and not only a mold into which they are pressed. To deny this is to repeat, in critical dress, the same devaluation of the relational that the critique elsewhere opposes.

The point about agency must be made carefully, because it is easily heard as a capitulation, as though to grant that women act within the cycle were to grant that the cycle is fine. It is not that. The second reading does not deny the extraction the first reading documents; it denies that documenting the extraction exhausts the description of what women are doing. A woman who deploys sweetness can be, at one and the same time, the object of a gendered extraction and the agent of a relational strategy she has mastered, and to see only the first is to reproduce the condescension that has always accompanied the disparagement of feminine-coded skill. The history of devaluing care, receptivity, and the management of relation as not-quite-work, not-quite-skill, not-quite-agency is itself a feminist target, and a critique of *amai* that treats its practitioners purely as the patients of an imposed norm has, despite its intentions, joined the side that cannot see relational competence as competence. The second reading insists that the same act can carry both descriptions and that the refusal to let either silence the other is what fidelity to the phenomenon requires.

The Japanese context sharpens rather than dissolves this, and a brief note guards against a too-easy transposition. The Anglophone narrative of disciplined femininity arrives with its own assumptions about autonomy, individuality, and the suspicion of dependence, assumptions that are not culturally neutral and that the concept of 甘え was in part articulated by Doi to contest. To read *amai* through a framework that treats all dependence as presumptively suspect is to risk importing precisely the autonomy-fetish that the ethics of care and Doi's analysis both call into question, and thereby to misdescribe

as subordination what may, in its own cultural grammar, be a recognized and reciprocal mode of relation. This is not an argument that the gendered extraction is absent in Japan, it plainly is not absent, but a caution that the line between extraction and competence cannot be drawn by an imported template and must be drawn, if it can be drawn at all, with attention to the specific relational grammar in which *amai* actually operates. The cultural particularity that a later section addresses in general terms returns here in a pointed form: even the feminist judgment is boundary-dependent, and the boundary in question is partly cultural.

The two readings do not cancel. They locate a real question that neither alone can answer, and stating that question precisely is this section's contribution to the judgment that follows. The question is this: when is the gendered asymmetry of *amai* an extraction, the channeling of women's unwaged reproductive labor into a cycle that profits elsewhere, and when is it a stigmatized capacity for relation, a genuine competence that a culture of autonomy has wrongly taught us to read as weakness? These are not two names for one thing. They are two different things that can wear the same appearance, and the difference between them is, once again, the difference between a cycle that returns its value to those who generate it and one that does not. Feminism, divided against itself, delivers the inquiry's sharpest formulation of its own central question and, characteristically, refuses to pretend it can settle it from theory alone.

3.8. The Test of Judgment: Eudaimonic? Just? Genuine or Forged?

The frameworks have spoken and have not agreed. This section does not overrule them. It gathers the questions they raised into three criteria that can be stated and applied here, in this paper, without waiting on the fuller development they receive elsewhere.¹ The criteria are not a master framework that adjudicates the others; they are a way of asking, of any concrete cycle, three questions whose answers the frameworks have equipped us to seek.

¹The three criteria are given here in a deliberately minimal, self-standing form sufficient for the present case. Their full articulation, including the argument that sublimation rather than exhaustion is what a positive phase measures, and the conditions under which the criteria can be jointly applied, belongs to a companion paper in this series on the practice of flourishing, in preparation. Nothing in the present application depends on that fuller account.

The first criterion is the eudaimonic one, and it can be stated in the classical register the series has used before. A cycle is eudaimonic to the degree that it lets each participant's own singular dynamic unfold, in the Aristotelian sense in which flourishing is the activity of a life according to what is distinctively its own, rather than fixing each participant into a flattering but static image. Applied to the sweet cycle, the question is the one armed in the second section. Does the cycle open the slow, generative work of two singular dynamics meeting and unfolding, or does it substitute for that work the consumption of an image of being indulged, capturing the living relation in the imaginary and selling the picture back in place of the thing? The frameworks give a divided answer, which is the honest one. To the extent the objects mediate a real address between persons, the cycle can be eudaimonic. To the extent the image of the sweet self comes to be consumed in place of the unfolding it pictures, the cycle forecloses flourishing while appearing to deliver it.

The second criterion is justice, and it can be stated as a single operational test that the political economy section has already put to work. A cycle is just only if no one across its edge is reduced to mere fuel, contributing the value the cycle enjoys while counted in none of its benefits. This is not a demand that a cycle have no outside; every cycle has an outside. It is a demand that the outside not be a reservoir of unreturned value, that those whose labor and whose manufactured lack sustain the inner surplus not be permanently external to the distribution of what they sustain. By this test the sweet cycle, as capital currently organizes it, does not pass, because the production worker, the unwaged self-fashioning, and the manufactured anxiety are precisely such unreturned external streams.

The third criterion subsumes the first two into the structural distinction the series turns on, between a genuine and a forged accumulation. A cycle is genuine when the value it accumulates is generated within it and the spiral climbs on its own internally generated surplus; it is forged when the inner accumulation is sustained by importation from across the edge while the cycle presents itself as closed. The sign of the difference is whether the internal surplus survives an honest widening of the boundary. Widen the boundary of the sweet cycle and, as the previous sections showed, the surplus does not survive intact; it was in part transferred, not generated. The cycle is, in its current organization, forged.

It is worth being explicit about how the three criteria relate, since they are not simply three items on a checklist. The eudaimonic criterion concerns the quality of the relation for those within it, whether it opens or forecloses the unfolding of singular lives. The justice criterion concerns the relation's outside, whether it leaves anyone across its edge as unreturned fuel. The genuine-versus-forged criterion is the structural one that, in a sense, contains the other two: a cycle is forged exactly when its inner goods, including whatever eudaimonic and ethical goods it really does deliver, are sustained by an unjust importation from outside. This is why the three answers can diverge without contradiction. A cycle might be eudaimonic for its participants and yet forged, because the flourishing it affords them is paid for by an extraction they do not see; this is, the paper has argued, the actual situation of *amai* as capital now organizes it. The criteria are therefore not redundant and not reducible to one another; they measure different things, and a complete judgment requires all three precisely because a cycle can pass one while failing another. The refusal to collapse them into a single score is not indecision but accuracy, a recognition that the goodness of a cycle is irreducibly plural in its dimensions.

These three answers do not combine into a single verdict, and the refusal to combine them is not evasion. The cycle is, at once, capable of being eudaimonic in the meeting of persons, unjust in the external streams it leaves unreturned, and forged in the structure of its accumulation. The right conclusion is not that one of these is the truth and the others appearance. It is that the goodness of a cycle that looks good is decided differently at different scales, and that the decision turns, in every case, on where the boundary is drawn and who is allowed to fall outside it. That observation does not end the inquiry. It hands it to practice, which is the only place where a boundary can actually be redrawn.

3.9. Cultural Particularity and the Question of the Universal

An honesty the inquiry owes itself concerns the status of its central example. *Amai* is not a culturally neutral specimen of intimate consumption. It is a structure that Doi raised to theoretical prominence as something characteristically, though he did not claim exclusively, Japanese, and the Ginza cover that occasioned this paper is a particular artifact of a particular consumer culture. The question this raises is whether the judgments reached above are about *amai*, this culturally specific structure, or about intimate consumption

cycles as such, and the paper should not let the convenience of its example obscure the difference. Before drawing the methodological conclusion, the cultural specificity itself deserves substantive attention, for the inquiry has leaned heavily on *amai* and *kawaii* without yet asking why these forms are so culturally pronounced where they are.

3.9.1 The Cultural Specificity of Amai

That dependence might be regarded not as a failing but as a recognized and even valued mode of relation is the central claim of Takeo Doi's *The Anatomy of Dependence*, and the claim is explicitly comparative. Doi developed the concept of *amae* in part by contrast with the assumptions about autonomy and independence he encountered in Western, and especially American, clinical and social settings, arguing that Japanese social life affords *amae* a structural centrality and a positive valuation that the autonomy-centered cultures tend to withhold. One need not accept every element of Doi's account, and much in it has been contested, including the risk of essentializing a complex society into a single relational key and the nihonjinron tendency, the genre of writing on Japanese uniqueness, into which his work was sometimes absorbed. The durable point that survives the criticism is narrower and sufficient for this paper: that whether dependence reads as weakness or as competence is not a cultural universal but varies with the relational vocabulary a society makes available, and that Japanese culture has historically made available a vocabulary in which licensed reliance is legible as a bond rather than a deficiency. This is precisely the cultural condition under which a magazine can place sweetness and justice in apposition and be understood, rather than dismissed, by its readers.

3.9.2 Kawaii as a Historically Specific Formation

The aesthetic of *kawaii*, the cute, on which the sweet cycle so heavily draws, has itself been the object of serious cultural study, and that study delivers a result this paper needs: *kawaii* is not a timeless taste but a historically specific formation, which is exactly what one would expect of a form that capital has, on the argument of the political economy, reshaped from within. Sociological work on Japanese cute culture, notably Sharon Kinsella's study "Cuties in Japan," has traced its emergence and intensification from the 1970s onward, tied to youth and especially girls' culture, to new practices of handwriting and consumption, and to the apparatus of a consumer economy that found

in cuteness an unusually productive form. Brian McVeigh's work on *kawaii*, including his study of how Hello Kitty commodifies the cute, extended the analysis to its institutional and self-presentational dimensions, the ways cuteness operates in schools, workplaces, and bureaucracies as a managed mode of appearance rather than a mere personal preference. What this literature establishes, for the purposes of the present argument, is that the cute is datable and made, that it has a social history, and therefore that its current organization around the commodity is not the unfolding of a natural aesthetic but a contingent and reshaped arrangement. The political economy's claim of real subsumption, that capital has remade the very grammar of sweetness, is corroborated by the cultural historians' finding that the grammar has a recent and traceable history rather than a timeless one. A form with a history is a form that could have been, and could yet be, otherwise.

3.9.3 Affective Economy and the Global Circulation of the Cute

A third body of work bears on the tension between the particular and the universal that this section must finally address, and it concerns the global circulation of Japanese cute and affective commodities. Christine Yano's study of the worldwide travels of Hello Kitty, *Pink Globalization*, under the heading of what she calls pink globalization, and Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters*, an analysis of the global movement of Japanese toys and character goods, both document how a culturally specific aesthetic of the cute has been exported, localized, and consumed far beyond its origin. Within Japan, the discourse around *moe*, the affectionate response to cute and fictional characters analyzed by Hiroki Azuma in his account of otaku culture as a database-driven consumption, describes an affective economy in which attachment itself is elicited, elementized, and consumed, an economy strikingly continuous with the structure this paper has described under the name of the sweet cycle. The lesson of this literature is double and is exactly the lesson the next subsection needs. On one side, the cute is culturally specific in its origin and its dense local meanings; on the other, it has proven remarkably exportable, which shows that something in its structure travels even as its texture remains local. This is the empirical shape of the particular-universal tension, and it cautions against both of the errors the methodological discussion will name: the cute is neither a culture-free universal nor a sealed local curiosity, but a specific formation with a structure that can migrate.

3.9.4 The Methodological Conclusion

With the cultural specificity now given its due, the methodological conclusion can be drawn. Two errors are available here and both should be refused. The first is to treat *amai* as merely a local instance of a universal mechanism, so that the cultural specificity is decorative and the real object is a culture-free logic of intimate commodification. This error flatters the analysis with a reach it has not earned, and it repeats at the level of method the very gesture the paper criticizes, the drawing of a boundary, here a conceptual one, that quietly writes the particular out of the account. *Amai* is not interchangeable with any intimate consumption cycle whatever; its specific grammar of licensed dependence, its specific aesthetic of the cute, its specific gendered distribution in its own context are not removable wrappers around a universal core. The second error is the mirror of the first, to treat *amai* as so singular that nothing learned from it travels, so that the analysis is a closed ethnography with no purchase elsewhere. This error is equally unearned, because the structural distinction the paper turns on, between a surplus generated within a cycle and one imported from across its edge, is not specific to any culture, even though every actual cycle that instantiates it is. The literature on the global circulation of the cute has just shown, empirically, why both errors fail: the cute is at once locally dense and structurally portable.

The defensible position lies between, and it is the position the paper adopts. *Amai* is used here as a particular through which a general question becomes unusually legible, not as a specimen from which a universal law is read off. What travels from the analysis is not a verdict transferable to every intimate consumption cycle but a method, the practice of asking, of any such cycle in its own specificity, the three questions of the previous section, and of refusing the framing that lets the cycle look closed. The boundary-drawing test is general; its application is irreducibly local, because where the edge of a cycle falls, and who is left across it, is always a fact about a particular arrangement in a particular culture. To claim more than this would be to commit, in the form of the argument, the extraction the argument was written to expose, helping ourselves to a universal reach while leaving the particular labor of cultural specificity uncounted.

There is a pleasing and not accidental self-reference in this. The paper's central charge against the forged cycle is that it draws its boundary too narrowly and lets value it did not

generate flow in from an uncounted outside. A theory that helped itself to universal reach on the strength of a single culturally specific case would be doing the intellectual analogue of the same thing, enjoying a generality it had not earned by drawing its evidentiary boundary narrowly and treating the unexamined remainder of the world's intimate cycles as a free reservoir confirming its law. To refuse that is not only methodological caution; it is the consistency of practicing on one's own argument the discipline one demands of one's object. The paper can claim to have made a general question legible through *amai*. It cannot claim to have settled, from *amai* alone, how that question is answered for cycles it has not examined, and the honesty of stopping where the evidence stops is the same honesty the whole paper has been asking of the cycle it studies.

3.10. A Practice of the Good Amai

Everything to this point has been preparation for a question that critique alone cannot answer. If the sweet cycle as capital now organizes it is forged, the right response is not to renounce sweetness, which would be both joyless and confused, but to ask how a sweet cycle might be made genuine, how the love and the extraction that currently run on the same track might be pulled apart. The frameworks that judged the cycle do not, however, yield a single procedure for mending it, and to pretend they did would betray the form this paper has kept throughout. What follows is therefore not a method but a set of practices, several of them, each answering to one of the criteria, none of them reducible to the others, and all of them pointing toward the same end without being unified into a formula for it. They are offered as practices in the plural because a good cycle, like a good conclusion, is not the kind of thing a single rule produces.

The first is a practice of justice, and it is the most demanding because it works against the very framing that makes the cycle pleasant. To make a sweet cycle just is to widen its boundary deliberately and to keep it widened, to refuse the closure that lets the production worker, the self-fashioning labor, and the manufactured anxiety fall outside the account. Concretely it means insisting that the chain that supplies the cycle its means be visible and fairly compensated rather than externalized; that the reproductive labor of being sweet be recognized as labor rather than naturalized as self-love, so that its cost is counted and can be shared rather than silently borne; and that the cycle refuse to run

on manufactured insufficiency, that it decline the engine of produced anxiety even at the cost of turning more slowly. The test is the one the seventh section named: the cycle's surplus must survive an honest widening of its boundary. A sweet cycle passes only if, when everyone who sustains it is counted, no one is left contributing without return.

The second is a practice of ethics, and it draws on the side of the fracture the ethics of care held open. A sweet cycle is ethically good to the degree that dependence within it is mutually acknowledged rather than unilaterally imposed, and to the degree that the roles of the one who is indulged and the one who indulges can move between the partners rather than hardening along a line, most often a gendered line, that assigns one of them permanently to sweetness and the other permanently to provision. The practice here is reciprocity in the grammar of *amai* itself: that each may be sweet and each may indulge, that the licensed reliance flows both ways and is not the standing duty of one and the standing privilege of the other. A cycle in which dependence is shared and the positions are fluid treats both persons as ends. A cycle in which one party is permanently the sweet one and the other permanently the provider has, whatever its surface tenderness, already begun to use.

The third is a practice of flourishing, and it concerns the eudaimonic criterion and the danger of the image. To keep a sweet cycle eudaimonic is to keep the object in its place as a medium and to refuse to let it become a substitute, to let the cosmetic and the small sweet thing serve the real meeting of two singular dynamics rather than standing in for that meeting with a flattering picture. The practice is a kind of vigilance against the imaginary, an attention to whether what is being consumed is access to the other or only the image of oneself as the one who is indulged. A relation in which the objects open the slower work of two lives unfolding together is one thing; a relation in which the image of being indulged is consumed in place of that unfolding is another, and only the first lets each person become what is distinctively theirs to become.

The fourth is a practice of co-creation, and it is the one that gathers the others toward a positive picture without unifying them under a rule. A genuinely good sweet cycle is one in which the participants are not only consumers of a sweetness produced elsewhere but co-creators of it, in which the value the cycle accumulates is generated within the relation and returned to those who generate it, and in which recognition is not locked to

the commodity but can be made and remade between the partners by their own invention. The mark of such a cycle is that its spiral climbs on value the partners themselves bring into being, a shared language, a private repertoire of address, the small invented forms by which two people make and answer one another's appeal, rather than on an ever-larger tribute drawn from across its edge. Where the forged cycle deepens by reaching further out each time, the genuine cycle deepens by generating more within, and what it generates belongs to the ones who made it.

The fifth is the deepest, because it concerns not the justice, the ethics, the flourishing, or the value-flow within a given form of *amai*, but the production of the form itself, and it answers directly the diagnosis of real subsumption reached in the political economy. There the argument was that capital has not merely attached commodities to a pre-existing practice of sweetness but has reshaped the practice from within, remaking what it is to be cute, to be indulged, to charm, around the commodity, so that the very grammar of intimate reliance now bears the impress of what must be bought to enact it. Capital decides, in advance and for sale, what counts as cute, what counts as being indulged, what one must use in order to be sweet. The fifth practice is the reversal of that subsumption: the reclaiming, by the relation, of the power to generate the forms of its own sweetness. It is the two people inventing the vocabulary of their own *amai*, a private name that only they understand, a gesture of tenderness that need not be purchased, a sweetness that is theirs. Where capital supplies a ready-made grammar of sweetness and sells the right to speak it, this practice writes a grammar between two people that no one sold them and no one can repossess.

The point requires a careful measure, lest it collapse into an unworkable asceticism that would impoverish rather than enrich. The practice is not the refusal of every purchased thing, as though a bought object could not carry real tenderness, for a gift chosen with attention is itself a genuine act of relational creation and not a capitulation to capital. The distinction is not between the bought and the unbought but between who authors the meaning. A commodity may participate in the cycle, but the form and the meaning of the sweetness must be generated by the relation rather than dictated by the market. To take a purchased thing and invest it with a significance the two of them made, a particular flower that means something only because of a day they shared, is to use the

commodity as a medium for a meaning the relation authored, and that is the good case. To buy a thing whose meaning capital has already fixed, and to enact one's sweetness according to that prescribed meaning, is to let the market author the intimacy, and that is the subsumed case. The mediation of lack, which the second section showed to be a structural position that any living relation requires, will be filled by someone; the only question is whether the relation fills it by its own invention or cedes it to the commodity. This fifth practice is the standing refusal to cede it, the insistence that the position be occupied by what the two of them generate rather than by what they are sold, so that *amai* is, at its origin, co-created in the relation and only secondarily, and on the relation's own terms, mediated by anything bought.

The five practices do not always pull in the same direction, and honesty requires admitting the tensions among them rather than presenting a frictionless program. The practice of justice may demand that one refuse a commodity whose production chain one cannot vouch for, even when that commodity is exactly the medium through which a relationship has learned to express its tenderness, so that the just choice and the ethically warm choice can, in a given moment, diverge. The practice of flourishing, with its vigilance against the image, can sit uneasily with the simple pleasures of the cute, which are not in every instance a capture and which a too-severe suspicion would impoverish. A relation that audited every sweetness for its structural soundness would have exchanged one foreclosure of flourishing for another, the spontaneity of address sacrificed to the rigor of critique. The practices are therefore not a checklist to be satisfied simultaneously but a set of considerations to be held in a living balance, and the balance cannot be struck in advance by a formula because it depends on the particular two people, their particular means, and the particular cycles their sweetness is entangled with. This is why they are practices and not a method. A method would tell you what to do. A practice is something you get better at, in the doing, with attention, and never finish.

I let these five practices stand without resolving them into one, because the unity they have is the unity of a direction and not of a method, and to force them further would be to do to them what the good cycle refuses to do to its participants, to subordinate their several dynamics to a single imposed form. And I allow the section to end on a register the critical sections held in abeyance, because the paper would be dishonest if it

pretended the question were only structural. A sweet cycle made just, ethical, flourishing, co-creative, and authored in its very form by the relation rather than by the market is not an abstraction. It is something two people can actually make, and have made, when they take care that the sweetness between them costs no one outside them what it should not, when they generate its value themselves rather than buying it ready-made, and when the forms of their tenderness are invented between them rather than supplied to them. To the one for whom the larger series was written, the girl of the forest and the mountains whose love of what grows and travels has been its quiet argument all along, this section is in the end addressed: that the sweetest cycle is the one we make between us, that returns to us what we put into it, and that takes nothing from anyone it does not see. The good *amai* is not bought. It is generated, gently, and kept.

3.11. Conclusions, in the Plural

This paper does not close on a verdict, and the refusal is the paper's final claim rather than its failure to reach one. The frameworks were set before the same cycle and did not agree, and what their disagreement teaches is that the goodness of a cycle that looks good is not a property a single framework can certify. It is decided at different scales by different measures, and an honest account preserves the plurality rather than dissolving it. The conclusions are therefore several, each stating what it can and cannot say, and none entitled to the last word over the rest.

Psychoanalysis concludes that the sweet cycle never ends because what it sustains is not a need but a desire, and desire lives on a lack kept in operation. It cannot say whether the cycle is just, and it does not pretend to.

Neuroscience concludes that the satisfactions of the cycle are real events in the systems of reward and attachment, that the participants are not deceived about feeling what they feel. It concludes equally that neural reality is not justice, and that no argument may pass from the genuineness of the happiness to the goodness of the cycle.

The ethics of care concludes that within the relation persons may genuinely tend one another, that dependence is a competence and not a deficiency, and that a cycle may be ethically nourishing in the conduct of its parties. It cannot see across the relation to

what sustains it, and it says so.

Structuralism concludes that sweetness signifies only by its difference from what it is not, and that the cover's proposition is a myth in the technical sense, a naturalization of a contingent association between sweetness and justice. It cannot say whether the myth conceals an injustice, because what is concealed is by definition outside the system of signs it reads.

Dialectics concludes that the good and the forged are not two facts about the cycle but two moments of a single self-moving contradiction, that the cycle's nourishing openness and its colonizability are one determination seen from two sides. It is to be resisted at the moment it offers to resolve that contradiction in a reconciling totality, for that resolution is the synthesis the paper refuses.

Kantian ethics concludes that the inner relation may treat its parties as ends while the production worker and the unwaged self-fashioner are treated, in the cycle as organized, largely as means, and it reaches the cycle's wronged edge by a deontological route owing nothing to political economy. It cannot easily honor the culturally specific, relational good that the ethics of care defends, and so it and the ethics of care genuinely disagree.

The formal tools conclude, in six different precise languages, that the difference between a genuine and a forged cycle is real and structurally definable, as an autonomous versus a driven attractor, a non-terminating derivation, a holonomy sourced within or across the boundary, a missing master functor, an equilibrium with or without externalized players, a channel with or without manufactured noise. They conclude, each at the point of its greatest precision, that the verdict it computes is relative to a boundary the formalism cannot itself choose, and so that no formal tool is the view from nowhere.

Political economy concludes that the cycle, at the scale of its production and reproduction, is a forged holonomy, an open system that imports its surplus from across its edge while presenting itself as closed, sustained by a production chain, an unwaged labor of self-fashioning, and a manufactured lack, none of them counted in its benefits. It cannot, by critique alone, say whether the cycle could be organized otherwise.

Feminism concludes against itself, that the gendered asymmetry of *amai* is at once a

real extraction of women's unwaged labor and a real capacity for relation that a culture of autonomy has stigmatized, and that which of these a given cycle instantiates is not decidable from theory but turns on whether its value returns to those who generate it.

The practices conclude that a sweet cycle can be made just, ethical, eudaimonic, co-creative, and authored in its very form by the relation rather than the market, that the love and the extraction now running on one track can in principle be pulled apart, and that the good *amai* is generated between persons rather than bought ready-made. They do not conclude with a single method for doing so, because a good cycle is not produced by a rule.

There remains the difficulty that no conclusion above can absorb, and it must be stated plainly rather than hidden in the confidence of the others. Every judgment in this paper turned on where the boundary of the cycle is drawn and who is allowed to fall outside it, and the drawing of that boundary is itself an act performed from somewhere, by someone, with a view that is not the view from nowhere. To decide who counts as fuel is already to have taken a position, and the paper has no vantage above all positions from which to certify its own. This is not a reason to abstain from judgment; the streams of unreturned value are real whether or not any observer is perfectly placed to total them. It is a reason to hold the judgments offered here as serious and revisable rather than final, as the best account available to a situated inquiry and not the pronouncement of a tribunal. *Amai*, the small sweet thing that occasioned all this, turns out to have been teaching exactly this lesson from the start: that a cycle which looks good from inside is asking us, by the very comfort of the view, not to look at its edge, and that the work of justice begins where the looking-away was meant to stop.

Acknowledgements

This paper, like the others in its series, was written for one reader before all others, the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves what grows and what travels, and whose way of being in a relation has been the standing argument that the sweetest cycle is the one made and kept between two people, returning to them what they put into it and costing

no one outside it what it should not. The exchange with Ron Eglash on generative justice continues to shape how the author thinks about value returning to those who create it, and the present paper's central distinction owes much to that conversation. Whatever in these pages is just is owed to others; whatever is forged is the author's own.

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CHAPTER 4

The Causality of the Non-Binding Vow

On Trust, Promise, and the Generation of Expectation in the Absence of the Other's Sword

This paper asks how a promise that carries no enforcing force — a vow, a betrothal document, a memorandum of understanding — can nonetheless generate real and well-founded trust. Beginning from the symptomatology of the contemporary condition, in which the apparatus of assurance proliferates at every scale while the trust it secures grows scarcer, it diagnoses the failure to a mistake about causation: the taking of force, the mechanical cause, for the cause of an effect, trust, that is inferential and free. It traces, through the philosophy of law, the migration of the anchor of legal validity from force toward trust, which the law records at its own technical edge in the doctrine of promissory estoppel; and it argues that the inferential cause is a different kind of thing from the mechanical, the kind that addresses a free being as free. Its central contribution is a mechanism: trust is the precision a receiver's generative model assigns to the prediction that a promise will be kept, generated through three coupled channels — a structural prior, a high-fidelity self-committing likelihood, and a wagered prior — whose multiplicative coupling makes genuine trust robust where any single channel is forgeable. It gives this mechanism a geometric reading in the language of holonomy and a structural reading, for relational trust, in the language of open quantum-system dynamics; states the criterion of justice that distinguishes genuine trust from forged; develops a theory of the translation of sincerity across incommensurable epistemologies; and reconceives, in a historical-materialist register, the optimisation of the juridical as the decentralisation of enforcement. It rises, at its summit, to the claim that the self-legislation, self-adjudication, and self-keeping of a subject who binds himself without recourse is the descent of a relational divinity — so that the non-binding vow proves, in the dimension of the divine, the purer realisation of what a promise is. It concludes in plural conclusions, refusing, in its own form, the synthesis its thesis forbids.

For the girl of the forest and the mountains,

to whom a promise was made

that no sword stands behind,

and which is, for that very reason,

the more wholly given.

本乎此心，自成永恒。

To the one I love most.

4.1. Introduction

This paper is the thirteenth in a series on the philosophy of intimacy and the theory of justice. Where the Prelude entered the question through a single experience, this section states it as a problem, fixes its scope, and sets out what the paper claims to establish. The question is the one the Prelude arrived at: *how a promise that carries no enforcing force generates trust*. A vow, a betrothal document, a memorandum of understanding, a bare promise—an utterance that binds the one who makes it to a future conduct, but which no court will enforce, which threatens no penalty, and behind which stands no power that can compel performance—is nonetheless, in the right conditions, believed; and the believing is not credulity but a real and often well-founded expectation that the thing will be kept. The paper asks by what mechanism this expectation is produced.

The problem has a structure that makes it look, at first, impossible. Trust is directed at a future, and the future does not yet exist and cannot be verified; the symbol that asks for trust has no force, and so cannot secure the future by threatening a consequence. The thing to be explained is therefore how a symbol *about what does not exist*, carrying *no guarantee of consequence*, produces a real expectation in the present—something close to a generation from nothing. The paper’s central and original contribution is an account of that mechanism. Its other contributions, set out below, are largely applications, extensions, and consequences of it.

Scope

The paper concerns the generation of trust by non-coercive symbols, across three concentric scales: the intimate vow between two persons; the promise carried outward to a wider circle, the family in particular; and the public institutions, contract and the courts, in which the same problem appears at the scale of a society. It treats these scales as continuous: the same mechanism is argued to operate at each, and the paper moves between them rather than confining itself to one. It does not offer a general theory of trust as a psychological disposition, nor a survey of the empirical sociology of trust; it offers a mechanism for the specific case of the non-coercive promise, and traces that mechanism’s reach. Where the argument requires the resources of jurisprudence, of the cognitive sciences, of psychoanalysis, of political economy, and of the Daoist and Kantian traditions, it draws

on them as the prior papers in the series have drawn on them: as several irreducible epistemic positions on a single object, none of which governs the others.

Relation to the foundational paper and to the series

The paper stands in a definite relation to a foundational text, to which it should be read as a sustained development of two of that text's diagnostic themes. The foundational paper (Wanhong 2025) sets out the framework of which the present series is a part, and devotes nearly half its length to a diagnosis of the crisis of the symbol under modern conditions, across several dimensions. The present paper takes up two of those dimensions in particular—the crisis of authenticity and trust, and the overload of justice—and subjects them to the exhaustive mechanistic analysis that the foundational paper, whose purpose was diagnostic, deferred. Where the foundational paper established that trust has come under a crisis whose mechanism it did not specify, the present paper specifies the mechanism; where the foundational paper diagnosed an overload of the juridical and a failure of enforcement, the present paper carries that diagnosis to the claim that force has failed *as a signal*, and offers the way out the foundational paper marked but did not develop. The relation to the wider series is similarly definite. The paper draws on the geometric-phase or holonomy apparatus developed earlier in the series, on its three-register theory of value, and on its account of the practitioner who cannot guarantee that his practice is good; and it observes, as the series requires, the discipline by which no single framework is permitted to absorb the others.

Contributions

The paper claims to establish the following. *First*, and centrally, that the expectation a non-coercive promise produces is generated by a mechanism that can be given a definite form: trust is the high precision a receiver's generative model assigns to the prediction that the promise will be kept, and this precision is supplied through three coupled channels—structural, self-committing, and wagered—which multiply rather than add, so that the consistency among them, hard to forge, is the source of well-founded trust (§4.6). *Second*, a jurisprudential result: that enforcing force is not the cause of obligation but a substitute mechanism for the production of expectation, and that the internal development of legal philosophy has, over a century, moved the anchor of legal validity away from force and

toward trust—a movement the law itself records, at its technical edge, in the doctrine of promissory estoppel (§4.4). *Third*, an account of relational trust, the trust transmitted along the links of a relational network, as a phenomenon spanning all three registers, together with a new specification of how it fails under the crisis of the symbol: through a separation of the symbolic vehicle of trust from the real coupling it should carry (§4.9). *Fourth*, a theory of the translation of sincerity across the borders of incommensurable epistemologies, with its attendant ethics (§4.10). *Fifth*, a direction for the reform of the juridical, developed in a historical-materialist register, toward the decentralisation of enforcement (§4.11). *Sixth*, and as the paper’s metaphysical summit, an account of self-legislation as the descent of a relational divinity, with the consequence that the promise which has no force may be, in respect of this, the more fully realised (§4.12).

A note on method and on what is conceded

Two commitments run through the paper. The first concerns the status of its formal and scientific apparatus. The paper draws on predictive coding for the mechanism of trust, and on the dynamics of open quantum systems for the structure of relational trust; it does so as the prior papers drew on the geometric phase, as *mechanistic and structural* models and not as reductive claims about what trust ultimately is. Predictive coding furnishes a description at the computational and implementational level; it does not displace the phenomenological, the juridical, or the ethical descriptions of the same object, and it is not a meta-framework that absorbs them. The same discipline governs the use of the quantum-dynamical language in §4.9: a structural isomorphism is claimed, not a physical reduction. The second commitment is the series’ refusal of a governing conclusion. The paper ends not in a synthesis but in plural conclusions, each framework stating what it can and cannot say, because the object—trust generated without a guarantor—is one no single framework possesses, and the form of the paper is meant to enact this as much as to assert it (§4.13).

Limitations and what is left open

The paper is candid about its limits. The holonomy apparatus is employed as a structural analogy rather than developed to full formal closure here, the relevant formal programme being carried by another paper in the series; the genealogy of trust-grammars it offers

(§4.10) is offered as adequate to its practical purpose rather than as exhaustive, and admits of finer subdivision; the depth to which the predictive-coding account is pressed, in particular toward a first-principles treatment in terms of the active reduction of expected uncertainty, is deliberately bounded, the stronger and more technical development being noted rather than carried out. The quantum-dynamical isomorphism of §4.9 is presented as a formal analogy inviting, but not here supplying, its own development. These are marked as open rather than concealed, in keeping with the series' discipline of distinguishing what is claimed from what is conjectured.

Plan of the paper

The paper proceeds as follows. It assembles, without yet explaining them, the symptoms of the contemporary condition of trust (§4.2); and diagnoses them, drawing on the foundational paper and on the older problems of Hume and Kant, to the thesis that force is not the cause of trust (§4.3). It then locates that thesis within the philosophy of law, tracing the migration of the anchor of legal validity from force toward trust (§4.4), and draws out the metaphysical consequence, that the cause of trust is inferential rather than mechanical and that this is the very opening in which freedom and the moral are possible (§4.5). It develops the central mechanism (§4.6); gives its geometric reading in the language of holonomy (§4.7); states the criterion that distinguishes genuine trust from forged (§4.8); analyses relational trust and its failure, with its quantum-dynamical structure (§4.9); and develops the theory of translation by which sincerity crosses the borders of epistemology (§4.10). It turns then to practice: to the reform of the juridical at the scale of institutions (§4.11), and to the praxis of trust at the scale of a life, rising to the account of relational divinity that is the paper's summit (§4.12). It concludes in plural conclusions (§4.13), and closes in an envoi.

4.2. The Symptomatology of Trust

Before a condition is diagnosed it is presented, and a diagnosis that proceeds without first attending to the symptoms is a diagnosis of nothing. This section assembles the symptoms. It does not yet explain them; explanation is the work of §4.3, and to anticipate it here would be to read the symptoms in the light of a thesis they are meant to motivate

rather than to confirm. The discipline of the section is therefore descriptive: it sets out a range of observable, recognisable phenomena, drawn from the most intimate scale of human dealing to the most public, and asks only that they be looked at together, in the expectation that what governs them will appear, when it appears, as the explanation of a pattern already seen rather than as a hypothesis imposed upon scattered instances.

The phenomena, looked at together, exhibit a single and initially paradoxical shape. *The apparatus by which trust is secured proliferates, and trust itself grows scarcer.* Wherever one looks, the instruments designed to produce or guarantee or certify reliability multiply — longer contracts, more elaborate vows, denser systems of credentialing, ever finer mechanisms of rating and verification — and the multiplication does not arrest the erosion of the thing the instruments exist to secure but accompanies it, and, in a way the section will only describe and not yet account for, seems bound up with it. The relation between the proliferation and the erosion is left, here, deliberately unstated. That there is such a relation, recurring across scales that have otherwise little in common, is the observation the section exists to establish.

The phenomena are presented across three scales, from the intimate outward, not because the intimate is a miniature of the public — whether it is or is not is a question for later — but because the recurrence of one shape across scales that differ in every other respect is itself the first thing to be seen.

4.2.1 The intimate and familial scale

At the most intimate scale, the symptom appears first in the very document from which this paper set out. A betrothal is undertaken, and around it gathers an apparatus of solemnisation — the auspicious day, the silk, the gravity of the language, in other settings the ring, the announcement, the assembled witnesses — whose elaboration is in no evident proportion to the security it confers, since it confers, in the strict sense, none. People who undertake such a thing know, when they reflect, that nothing in the ceremony binds; and they elaborate the ceremony anyway, and feel the elaboration as weighty rather than as idle. This is already a symptom: a solemnising apparatus is invoked with full seriousness in the acknowledged absence of anything it could enforce.

The symptom recurs, in a sharper and more troubling form, in the marriage that may fol-

low. The vows exchanged at weddings have grown, across recent generations and in many places, more articulate, more personal, more lavish in their profession of permanence, at the same time as the dissolution of the unions they open has grown more common rather than less. The observation is not offered here as a causal claim in either direction; it is offered as a juxtaposition that the symptomatology must record, that the form of the promise has become more elaborate as the persistence of what it promises has become less assured. The two curves, of the eloquence of the vow and of the fragility of the bond, have moved, over the relevant period, in the same direction, and a symptomatology notes this without yet asking what to make of it.

The symptom appears again, and most pressingly for the concerns of this paper, in the predicament of the one who must win the trust of a family not yet his own. Here the apparatus that elsewhere proliferates is precisely what is unavailable. The suitor has, by hypothesis, no track record with the family, no accumulated history by which he might be known, no third party they already trust who can vouch for him; he has only a sincerity that is, to him, entirely real, and that has, to them, no form they can read as evidence. The symptom at this scale is thus not the proliferation of the apparatus but the felt insufficiency of everything that is not it: the discovery that sincerity, however genuine, does not present itself as ground, and that the very people whose trust matters most are the people to whom one has least that they will count.

4.2.2 The legal and judicial scale

At the scale of law and commerce the same shape recurs with a documentary precision that makes it easy to measure. Contracts have grown longer. The instruments by which commercial parties bind one another have expanded, across the last century and with sharp acceleration in recent decades, into documents of a length and intricacy no party reads in full, drafted in anticipation of every contingency and every adversarial reading, and lengthening still; and the lengthening has not been accompanied by a growing ease of dealing or a growing confidence between contracting parties, but, by the testimony of those who deal under such instruments, by the opposite. The thicker the contract, the less, not the more, the parties feel secure; the elaboration of the terms is experienced less as the building of confidence than as its pre-emptive substitute, an arming against a breach already half expected.

Beside the contract stands the memorandum of understanding, and it is, for this paper, the most telling instrument at this scale precisely because it is the contract's opposite. The memorandum of understanding is, by design, non-binding: it records an intention, sets out the shape of a contemplated dealing, and explicitly withholds the force of an enforceable obligation. Such instruments proliferate. They are drafted with care, signed with ceremony, and treated by their signatories as significant, in the full and stated knowledge that they bind nothing. That parties expend such effort on the solemn execution of documents they know to be unenforceable is a symptom of exactly the kind this section collects: a grave investment in a form whose want of force is not concealed but declared.

And behind both contract and memorandum stands the court, in which the symptom takes its most consequential form. The machinery of enforcement, the sword to which all these instruments are nominally referred, is under a strain that has begun to show. The volume of breach exceeds the capacity of the courts to adjudicate it; the cost of enforcement, in time and money and attention, rises until for many wrongs it exceeds the value of the remedy; the period over which a judgment is obtained lengthens, and the prospect of actually recovering on a judgment, once obtained, narrows. The sword, in a word, hangs but increasingly does not fall, and is known not to fall; and an instrument of enforcement that is known not to fall has ceased, whatever its formal availability, to function as the thing it was. The symptom here is not the proliferation of an apparatus but the hollowing of one: the persistence of the full formal machinery of compulsion alongside its growing practical inability to compel.

4.2.3 The universal scale

At the widest scale the shape appears in its purest and most general form, in the instruments by which strangers are made legible to strangers. The letter of recommendation is the clearest case. It is an instrument designed to transmit a knowledge that the recipient cannot acquire directly: the writer, who knows the candidate, vouches for the candidate to a committee, which trusts the writer. And it has, by common acknowledgment within the institutions that rely on it, very largely ceased to function. The letters have inflated until nearly every candidate is described as among the best the writer has encountered; the superlative, having become universal, has become uninformative; and committees, no longer able to extract a signal from a channel everyone has learned to saturate, turn

away from the letters toward whatever can be counted — scores, citations, rankings — not because the counted things are richer but because they are, at least, harder to inflate. The apparatus of vouching has proliferated to the point of self-cancellation, and trust has retreated from it.

The same shape governs the systems of rating and certification by which the digital economy attempts to make its strangers legible. Trust badges, verification marks, star ratings, certification seals multiply across every surface on which strangers must deal with strangers; and their multiplication is met, by those who encounter them, not with growing confidence but with a growing and well-schooled wariness, since the very ubiquity of the mark of trustworthiness teaches that the mark is cheap, gameable, and as available to the predator as to the honest. The more the surface is covered with the signs of trustworthiness, the less any one of them reassures. Here the proliferation and the erosion are not merely concurrent but legibly bound: each new layer of certification is a response to the failure of the last, and itself elicits the next.

And beneath all these the most general symptom of the age, which the section records last because it underlies the rest: the condition of being surrounded by symbols whose provenance and whose intention cannot be established. The cost of producing a convincing token — a document, an image, a voice, a record of conduct — has fallen, with the technologies of the present, toward zero, and the consequence is a saturation of the human environment with signs that are no longer reliably tied to anything they purport to indicate. A person now moves through a world of symbols any of which may be confected, and the rational response to such a world — a generalised lowering of the weight given to all symbolic testimony — is itself a symptom of the first order: a withdrawal of trust not from this or that untrustworthy source but from the symbolic as such.

4.2.4 A taxonomy of the symptoms

The phenomena gathered above are not a miscellany. Looked at together, they are so many appearances of a single fissure, opening at different scales and in different materials, between an apparatus that is meant to secure trust and the trust it fails to secure. To make the unity visible, and to give the diagnosis of §4.3 a structured object rather than a list of anecdotes to work upon, the symptoms may be set out along a small number of

shared dimensions: the scale at which the symptom appears; the apparatus of assurance proper to that scale; the mode in which that apparatus fails; and the specific form the governing paradox — proliferation alongside erosion — takes in each case. The table that follows arranges them so. It is offered as a description and not as an explanation: each row records what is observed, and the column of failure-modes names the manner of a breakdown without yet assigning its cause. That every row instances one fissure, and what that fissure is, is the matter the table hands forward to the diagnosis.

Phenomenon	Scale	Apparatus of assurance	Mode of failure
Betrothal, wedding vow	intimate	ceremony, solemnity, profession of permanence	elaboration grows as the bond's persistence weakens; gravity without enforceability
Winning a family's trust	familial	sincerity, profession, proposed conduct	sincerity does not present as evidence to those who ask for grounds
Commercial contract	legal	enumerated terms, penalties, remedies	thickening of terms experienced as anxiety, not confidence; arming against expected breach
Memorandum of understanding	legal	solemn execution of a declared non-binding form	grave investment in an instrument known to bind nothing
The court, enforcement	judicial	compulsion, the threat of the sanction	the sword hangs but does not fall and is known not to; formal machinery hollowed of practical force

Phenomenon	Scale	Apparatus of assurance	Mode of failure
Letter of recommendation	institutional	a trusted writer's vouching along a chain	inflation to the superlative; the channel saturated to uninformativeness
Rating, certification, trust badge	platform	marks, seals, verification, star scores	ubiquity teaches cheapness; the mark reassures less the more it covers
The confected token	universal	symbolic testimony as such	zero-cost production severs sign from referent; rational withdrawal from the symbolic

Read down the columns, the table says more than any row. The scale ranges from two persons to a whole society, and the apparatus changes utterly across that range, from red silk to a star rating; yet the column of failure-modes rhymes. In every case a form that is meant to carry assurance is found, in the end, not to carry it: the form persists, elaborates, even proliferates, while the assurance drains out of it. Whether at the scale of a vow or of a verification mark, the gap that opens is the same gap — between the apparatus and the trust — and it is the recurrence of this one gap across a range that shares nothing else that constitutes the central symptom of the age. The proliferation of the apparatus and the erosion of the trust are, the table suggests without yet showing, two faces of one process. Naming that process, and showing why the proliferation should accompany rather than arrest the erosion, is the work to which the symptomatology now hands over.

4.3. Diagnosis

The symptoms gathered in §4.2 share a shape, and a shape that recurs across scales otherwise unrelated is evidence of a common cause. This section names that cause. It does so in the manner the foundational paper established for such work (Wanhong 2025): diagnosis here is not a preliminary to be hurried through on the way to a remedy, but a substantial undertaking in its own right, on the principle that the precision of a response is bounded by the precision of the diagnosis it answers. To see clearly how a gap has opened between the symbol and the thing it was to secure is already half of what is needed to respond to it; and so the section takes its time, and develops the diagnosis to a definite thesis, before any mechanism or remedy is proposed.

The foundational paper diagnosed a crisis of the symbol under modern conditions across several dimensions. The present paper does not recapitulate them all; it takes up the two that bear directly on trust—the crisis of authenticity and trust, and the overload of justice—and develops each beyond the point at which the foundational paper left it, weaving in three further of its dimensions where they bear on the mechanism, and adding one diagnostic dimension the foundational paper did not contain. It then sets the whole against the two older philosophical problems—Hume’s and Kant’s—that give the modern crisis its deeper form, and draws from the conjunction the thesis that organises the rest of the paper.

4.3.1 The crisis of trust: from the failure of trust to the failure of its production

The first dimension the foundational paper diagnosed under this head is by now familiar from the symptomatology: a saturation of the human environment with symbols whose cost of production has fallen toward zero, whose provenance cannot be established, and which are as available to deception as to sincerity, with the rational consequence that the weight given to symbolic testimony as such declines (Wanhong 2025). The foundational paper established this much. What the present paper must add—for it is the precise point at which the diagnosis turns into the problem this paper exists to solve—is that the crisis has passed beyond the failure of particular instances of trust into a doubt about *the producibility of trust at all*. It is one thing for a given promise to be disbelieved; it is another, and the deeper condition, for it to become unclear by what means *any*

promise could now be made believable. The symptomatology showed the apparatus of assurance failing at every scale; the diagnosis is that the failure is not of this or that instrument but of the question they all answer, so that the question itself — how is trust to be generated? — which in a healthier condition would not need to be asked, has become both urgent and obscure. This is why the mechanism of trust-generation, which a more confident age could take for granted and leave unexamined, must now be made the express object of inquiry.

4.3.2 The overload of justice and the failure of force as a signal

The second dimension is the one the foundational paper named the overload of justice (Wanhong 2025). As relational and communal orders of trust have thinned, the burden of holding people to their dealings has fallen, by default, upon the juridical: where once a web of relationship and reputation and communal witness held a person to his word, now the law is asked to do it, and is asked to do it for a volume and a variety of dealings it was never sized to bear. The foundational paper diagnosed the resulting overload: the law extended into ever more of life, and at the same time hollowed from within, asked to underwrite an order it lacks the means to underwrite.

The present paper carries this diagnosis one decisive step. The overload is not merely quantitative, a matter of too many demands upon a finite institution; it is the visible form of a deeper failure, the failure of *force as a signal*. The symptomatology recorded the sword that hangs but does not fall. The diagnosis of that symptom is this: the threat of compulsion produces compliance not by the mechanical certainty of the sanction — which, as the symptomatology showed, has become anything but certain — but by signalling to the parties that compliance is to be expected. Force, that is, operates as a substitute for expectation: it is one means among possible others of bringing a party to expect that an undertaking will be honoured. And a signal whose mechanical basis is known to have failed — a sword known not to fall — ceases to signal. The overload of justice is thus the macroscopic, institutional, observable face of the paper's central thesis, encountered here as a hard social fact before it is argued as a principle: that force was never the cause of the obligation, but only one device for the production of the expectation in which trust consists, and that the device is now failing on its own terms.

4.3.3 Three further dimensions: cause, consequence, and precondition

Three further of the foundational paper's dimensions enter the diagnosis, not as separate crises but as the cause, the consequence, and the precondition of the crisis of trust, and they are woven in here on that understanding rather than treated in their own right (Wanhong 2025).

The first is the *generativity paradox*: the capacity of the present age's technologies to produce symbols without limit and at no cost. This is the *cause*, at the level of material technique, of the saturation diagnosed above; it is why the forged signal has become not an occasional intrusion but the ambient condition, and why the production of a convincing token of sincerity can no longer, by itself, carry the weight it once did. The diagnosis of trust must be set upon this technical base, on pain of mistaking for a moral decline what is in the first instance a change in the cost of producing signs.

The second is the *return of the Real*: the eruption, where the symbolic order fails to hold, of what the symbolic was meant to bind—in the form of a free-floating anxiety, a susceptibility to conspiracy, a drift toward the fundamentalist and the violent. This is the *consequence*, at the level of the affective and the social, of a generalised failure of trust: when the symbolic testimony by which people orient themselves to one another can no longer be relied upon, what returns is not a neutral scepticism but a charged and disoriented seeking after some unfalsifiable ground. The diagnosis records this as the cost of leaving the crisis of trust unanswered.

The third is the *collapse of intersubjectivity*, the degradation of the relation in which one meets another as a presence rather than as an object—what an earlier language opposed as the I–Thou to the I–It. This is the *precondition* whose erosion most threatens the mechanism this paper will propose. For one of the channels by which trust is generated, as §4.6 will show, requires that a real self-committing act be received *by another who is present to receive it*; and where the relation has degraded to the merely instrumental, that channel is disabled at its root. The collapse of intersubjectivity is thus not one more symptom but a threat to the very possibility of the cure.

4.3.4 The decoupling of credibility from enforceability

To the dimensions drawn from the foundational paper the present diagnosis adds one the foundational paper did not contain, and which is, the paper submits, the specifically modern hinge on which its central problem turns. It is the historical decoupling of the *credibility* of a promise from its *enforceability*.

In the pre-modern settings against which the modern condition is most sharply seen, the two were bound together and were scarcely distinguished. A promise was credible and enforceable at once, and by the same fact: the god who witnessed the oath was also the power that would avenge its breach; the lineage or the village before whom the word was given was also the body that would exact the cost of breaking it; to be seen to promise was, in the same act, to be bound to perform, because the seeing and the binding were done by one and the same watching community. Credibility and enforceability were two aspects of a single social fact, and no one had occasion to prise them apart.

Modernity prised them apart. It assigned enforceability to a specialised institution, the law, which would compel performance through an abstract and impersonal machinery; and it left credibility—the quality by which a promise is believed in the first place, before and apart from any question of compulsion—without a corresponding institution to house it. So long as the law’s machinery of enforcement was robust, this division of labour was invisible, because enforceability could be relied upon to stand in for credibility: one did not need to find a promise credible if one could be assured it was enforceable. But the symptomatology has shown the enforcing machinery failing; and as it fails, the division of labour is exposed, and credibility is revealed for what modernity had quietly made it—an orphan, a quality with no institution to underwrite it, hanging unsupported now that the institution which had stood in for it can no longer bear the weight.

This is why the paper’s central problem is urgent *now*, and was not, in this form, urgent before. The question of how a promise becomes credible in the absence of enforcement is not a perennial philosophical puzzle that happens to have been posed again; it is the question a specific historical arrangement has forced into the open, by first making credibility depend upon enforceability and then allowing enforceability to fail. The orphaning of credibility is the diagnosis that pins the paper to its moment, and it is offered as the

diagnostic contribution most particularly the paper's own.

4.3.5 The two older problems: Hume and Kant

Beneath the modern crisis lie two older problems, which give it its deeper philosophical form and which the diagnosis must reach if the thesis it arrives at is to be more than a sociological observation.

The first is Hume's. The expectation that a person who has kept his word will keep it again, like every expectation that the future will resemble the past, rests upon induction, and induction, as Hume showed, has no foundation in reason: no accumulation of past performance *entails* future performance, and the inference from the one to the other, however indispensable, cannot be justified as a matter of logic (Hume 2000). This is the problem that the evidentialist's reliance upon track record can never wholly escape, and it sets a limit on what any quantity of evidence can establish: at the end of the longest record of kept promises there remains a gap, across which no evidence can carry one, between what has been and what will be. The diagnosis records this as the deep structural reason why trust can never be reduced to the accumulation of evidence: the gap Hume opened is constitutive, and every account of trust must say what it does about that gap rather than pretend to have closed it.

The second is Kant's. Where Hume's problem is that the inference to future conduct cannot be grounded in past fact, Kant's bears on the standing of the one who must nonetheless be relied upon. To treat a person solely as a system whose future behaviour is to be predicted from evidence and secured by incentive is to treat him, in the terms of the second formulation of the categorical imperative, merely as a means, as an object to be managed rather than an end in himself (Kant 1998). But a promise, in its full sense, is addressed to a free agent who binds himself, and is received from one; the one who promises is not predicting his own future conduct as one predicts the weather, but committing himself to it as only a free being can. The diagnosis records this as the reason the problem of trust cannot be fully handed over to prediction and incentive without changing its object: to model the promisor merely as a mechanism to be managed is to have stopped speaking of promising at all. The wager that the other will keep faith is, in part, a wager on his freedom — and this, as §4.5 will develop, is not a softness in the

account but the very opening in which everything the paper most wants to say becomes possible.

4.3.6 The thesis: force is not the cause of trust

The dimensions assembled converge on a single thesis, which the rest of the paper exists to develop, to ground, and to apply. It can be stated plainly. **Even where the coercive guarantee of the Other is fully present, trust under modern conditions has broadly declined; therefore force is not the cause of trust.** If the sword were the cause of the expectation, then where the sword stands ready the expectation should stand firm; but the symptomatology shows trust eroding precisely where the apparatus of compulsion is most fully elaborated, and the diagnosis of the overload of justice shows why: the sword secures expectation only by signalling, and a signal whose basis is known to have failed no longer signals, however sharp the blade remains. Force, then, is at most a contingent and now-failing device for the production of an expectation that is the real thing; it is not that expectation's cause.

The thesis turns on a distinction the rest of the paper will hold to throughout: between two senses of *cause*. There is the mechanical cause, which operates as one billiard ball operates upon another, by the transmission of a compulsion that leaves the affected body no part to play; and there is the inferential cause, which operates by giving a mind a ground on which to form an expectation, an expectation the mind itself produces and could, being free, have withheld. Force, where it works, works mechanically, or aspires to: it would move the promisor as a body is moved. But trust is not a body's motion; it is a mind's expectation, formed inferentially, on grounds. To say that force is not the cause of trust is to say that the mechanical cause is not the cause of the inferential effect — that the production of an expectation in a free mind belongs to a different order of causation than the compulsion of a body, and cannot be accomplished by it. The whole positive account of the paper follows from taking this distinction seriously: if trust is an inferential effect, then the question of how it is generated is the question of how the right grounds are supplied to the mind that forms it — and force, it turns out, is neither the only such ground nor, any longer, a working one.

With this the diagnosis is complete. The symptom was a gap, recurring across every scale,

between the apparatus of assurance and the trust it failed to secure. The diagnosis is that the apparatus failed because it was built on a mistake about its own working—the mistake of taking force, the mechanical cause, for the cause of an effect that is inferential and free—and that the crisis of the present is the coming-due of that mistake, as the one device the mistake had relied upon, enforcement, fails on its own terms and leaves the credibility it had stood in for without support. What remains is to show, positively, how the inferential effect is in fact produced: by what mechanism a free mind, given the right grounds, comes to expect that a promise will be kept. To that the paper now turns, beginning where the failed device itself began, in the philosophy of law.

4.4. The Jurisprudential Core: The Migration of the Anchor of Validity

The diagnosis ended by sending the inquiry to the philosophy of law, and for a definite reason. Law is the institution modernity charged with enforceability; it is where the device that the diagnosis found failing—force as the producer of expectation—was housed, theorised, and refined. If that device is not, after all, the cause of obligation, then the law’s own reflection upon itself should bear the marks of the discovery, and the history of legal philosophy should record, in its internal development, a movement away from the very ground modernity had assigned it. This section shows that it does. It is not a survey. It reads the major positions in the philosophy of law along a single axis—the *location of the anchor of validity*, the place at which each position lodges the force by which an obligation obliges—and it finds, reading them so, not a set of competing doctrines to be weighed but a directional movement to be traced: the anchor migrates, across a century of the law’s reflection upon itself, from force toward trust. The section follows that migration through eight positions, and arranges them at its close in a single view.

A word on the relation to the foundational paper, which treated several of these same thinkers along a different axis, that of structure against generation, the Symbolic against the Real (Wanhong 2025). The present reading is not a repetition but a re-cutting of the same material along a more focused axis: not what kind of thing law is, but where the force of its obligation is anchored. The two readings are consistent and complementary; the present one is the one the problem of trust requires.

4.4.1 The anchor in force: Austin and Hobbes

The movement begins where modernity's assignment is most undisguised, in the command theory of John Austin. For Austin, law is the command of a sovereign, backed by the threat of a sanction, habitually obeyed; and a legal obligation is, by definition, the standing liability to the sanction—to be obliged is to be exposed to the probability of an evil at the hands of one with the power and the will to inflict it (Austin 1832). The anchor of validity here is welded to mechanical cause. The obligation *is* the threatened pain; there is, in the account, no remainder, nothing in being bound over and above being liable to be hurt. Whatever else the command theory does, it states with unmatched clarity the position the rest of the chapter will move away from: that the force of an obligation is the force of a threatened consequence, and nothing else.

Behind Austin stands his metaphysical ancestor, Hobbes, whose famous sentence is the chapter's true point of departure: covenants without the sword are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all (Hobbes 1996). The sentence is usually read as a worldly observation about the weakness of unbacked promises. It is better read, for the purposes of this paper, as the statement of an anthropology from which the impossibility of trust follows by necessity. Hobbes's natural man, in the war of all against all, has no ground on which to expect his fellow's forbearance, and so trust is not merely scarce in the state of nature but *logically impossible*: there is nothing from which the expectation could be formed, and the sovereign must therefore be erected to inject, from outside, by the threat of overwhelming force, the expectation the parties cannot generate between themselves.

It is exactly here that the chapter's reading first bites. Austin and Hobbes take the limiting case—the case in which trust has wholly collapsed and only fear remains—and mistake it for the whole. The Hobbesian state of nature is the crisis of the symbol carried to its extremity, a world in which no symbol can produce expectation because none can be relied upon; and the Hobbesian remedy, the sword, is precisely the substitution of mechanical cause for the inferential cause that has failed. The command theory, then, is not false so much as it is the theory of a pathological limit. Its model has nothing to say where trust is present, because there force is redundant; it becomes visible, and seems complete, only where trust has collapsed and force is all that is left. And this is why it speaks so directly to the present: the contemporary overload of justice (§4.3.2)

is the world sliding toward the Hobbesian condition—trust thinning until the sword is asked to do everything—at the very moment when, as the symptomatology showed, the sword can no longer fall. The command theory describes the destination toward which the failure of trust tends; and the failure of the sword to fall, there, is the command theory’s own solution failing on its own terms.

4.4.2 The anchor moves toward acceptance: Hart’s internal point of view

The decisive turn, and the hinge of the whole chapter, is Hart’s. His critique of Austin is the moment at which the anchor of validity is, for the first time within legal positivism itself, pried loose from mechanical cause and moved toward something else. Two of his objections do the work. The first is the distinction between being *obliged* and having an *obligation* (Hart 1961). The gunman obliges me to hand over my money; I am not under an obligation to do so. Austin’s theory, which defines obligation as liability to a sanction, can capture only the first—the being-compelled—and is constitutively unable to capture the second, the normativity by which a rule gives me a reason and not merely a motive. The second objection is that whole classes of law—the power-conferring rules by which one makes a will, forms a contract, marries—are not commands backed by threats at all, but enabling structures that confer the capacity to alter one’s normative situation, and that the command theory simply cannot accommodate.

From these objections Hart draws the concept on which everything turns: the *internal point of view* (Hart 1961). A rule exists, as a rule and not as a mere observed regularity of compelled behaviour, where there is a group who accept it from the inside, who take it as a standard for their own conduct and as a ground for criticising deviation in others—who use the rule, in their reasoning and their appraisals, rather than merely conforming to it under threat. The internal point of view is a normative attitude, not a prediction; and it stands in sharp contrast, as §4.4.5 will show, to the external, predictive stance of one who asks only what will be done to him if he is caught. This is the jurisprudential moment at which the anchor of validity is moved from mechanical cause toward the normative—toward an acceptance that gives reasons, the very thing the inferential cause of the diagnosis traffics in.

The point reaches its depth in Hart’s account of the *rule of recognition*, the ultimate rule

by which a legal system's other rules are identified as valid. What grounds the rule of recognition itself? Hart's answer is that nothing grounds it from above; it rests upon nothing but the convergent practice of the officials who accept and use it. Its validity is not conferred by a higher rule, and is not secured by any sanction; its existence simply *is* the fact that it is accepted and acted upon. Here Hart arrives, without naming it so, at the position closest to this paper's: the ultimate ground of a legal order's validity is not a sword but a collective, self-sustaining acceptance—a convergence of the internal point of view across the body of officials, which holds itself up by being shared. This is, in the vocabulary of §4.6, the institutional-scale form of the structural channel: a shared prior, sustained by the very fact of being shared, that needs no external pump to hold it in place.

Honesty requires that Hart's own difficulty be marked, for it is the difficulty that hands the argument to Fuller. Is the acceptance in which the rule of recognition consists a matter of fact or a matter of norm? Hart wishes it to be a convergent social fact; but a bare factual convergence—that officials do, as it happens, behave alike—seems unable to generate the genuine obligation, the *ought*, that a rule of recognition is supposed to carry. This is the opening through which Dworkin pressed his critique, that law cannot be a matter of convergent practice alone but must involve an interpretive, value-laden commitment (Dworkin 1986). The paper does not adjudicate that dispute here; it notes only that the difficulty points beyond bare acceptance toward something acceptance alone does not supply, and that Fuller named what that something is.

4.4.3 The anchor in reciprocity: Fuller's inner morality of law

Fuller supplies what bare acceptance lacks. His claim is that law possesses an inner morality, a set of eight principles—that rules be general, promulgated, prospective, clear, non-contradictory, possible to obey, stable over time, and administered congruently with their announced terms—which are not external moral constraints upon law but conditions of its very existence as law (Lon L. Fuller 1969). The question Fuller's critics pressed is why these should be called a *morality* rather than a mere technique of effective governance, a craftsman's know-how for making rules that work. His answer, and the point at which his account becomes this paper's, is that the eight principles together constitute an implicit promise from the lawgiver to the governed, and that the eighth—*congruence*,

the requirement that officials actually administer the law as announced — is the heart of the matter, because it makes obedience a *reciprocity*. The citizen's fidelity to law is a response to the state's fidelity to its own announced rules; each side's keeping of faith is conditioned upon the other's. Strip the reciprocity away — let the state announce one rule and apply another — and the obligation to obey does not merely weaken but loses its ground, because the relation that grounded it was a mutual keeping of faith and one party has defected from it.

This reciprocity is trust under its proper name in the law. When Fuller says that law is a collaborative enterprise between the government and the citizen, an enterprise that fails not when a rule is broken but when the bond of reciprocity that constitutes it is betrayed, he has named, in the jurisprudential register, the very thing this paper is about: the anchor of validity lodged in a mutually relied-upon undertaking. The long debate between Fuller and Hart over whether law and morality are necessarily connected can, within this paper's frame, be re-described and, in a sense, settled in Fuller's favour — not on Fuller's own grounds but on the paper's: the anchor of validity, reciprocity, is itself a normative and relational thing, a keeping of faith, and not a neutral fact about convergent behaviour; so the validity of law cannot after all be specified without reference to the relation of trust in which it is anchored. Fuller's inner morality is, in this paper's terms, the institutional-scale form of all three channels of §4.6 at once — a structure that is also a self-commitment and that invites a wager — with the anchor lodged in a doubly relied-upon promise.

4.4.4 The anchor in procedure and discourse: Habermas and Rawls

A briefer station continues the movement Fuller began, by asking how legitimate norms are produced rather than where validity finally rests. Habermas locates the legitimacy of law in the discourse through which it is generated: norms are valid insofar as they could meet with the assent of all affected, in a communicative process governed by reason rather than force, and the legal-political system depends for its legitimacy upon a lifeworld of communicative practice that the system itself cannot produce and can only deplete (Habermas 1996). The structure of this dependence is worth marking, for it is isomorphic with a dependence this paper will meet again: just as the Habermasian system draws its legitimacy from a lifeworld it cannot generate from within itself, so

the likelihood-channel of trust, in §4.6, draws upon a real basis that the symbolic cannot manufacture. Rawls, with the device of a procedure — the original position — whose fairness confers legitimacy upon what issues from it, belongs to the same family (Rawls 1971): a family that anchors validity in the manner of its legitimate *production*. This is structurally the same kind of question as the paper's own — how is something legitimately produced? — asked of legitimacy where the paper asks it of trust; and noting the kinship, the chapter returns to its main line.

4.4.5 The first counter-coordinate: Holmes's bad man and legal realism

Against the movement toward acceptance and reciprocity, two positions hold the anchor down at force, and they must be given their due, for each marks a permanent coordinate the paper will need. The first is Holmes's. His advice to view the law through the eyes of the bad man — the man who cares nothing for the morality of the law and wishes only to know what the courts will in fact do to him, so that he may calculate — is the purest statement of the external, predictive stance (Holmes 1897). For the bad man, law just *is* a prediction of official behaviour, and obligation just is the calculated probability of a consequence; he is the perfect evidentialist, the subject of pure mechanical cause, who recognises no internal point of view because he occupies none.

The paper's treatment of Holmes is twofold. On the one hand, the bad man is real and his stance is irreducible: he is the exact portrait of the evidentialist trust-grammar that §4.10 will have to take seriously, the subject for whom only the predictable consequence counts and for whom sincerity is no evidence. To pretend he does not exist, or that his stance is simply a moral failing, is to disarm the paper before its hardest case. On the other hand, his limit is precise and must be stated. To model *every* subject as the bad man — to take the external predictive stance as the whole truth about legal subjects — is to erase the internal point of view a priori, and with it the possibility of meeting the other as a free subject who binds himself rather than as an object whose conduct is to be predicted and managed. The bad-man theory, generalised, is Kant's worry (§4.3.5) realised in jurisprudence: it reduces the person to an object determined by consequences. It is true of those who have made themselves bad men, and it is a standing possibility for anyone; it is not the truth about the human as such, and a theory that takes it for that truth has decided in advance against everything §4.5 will affirm. The sociological

extension of realism — the *living law* of Ehrlich, the law that actually governs conduct as against the law on the books — is noted here as a related and more capacious development, but the bad man is the figure that matters for the paper's argument.

4.4.6 The second counter-coordinate: Kelsen's pure theory

The second position that holds the anchor away from trust does so in the opposite direction from Holmes — not downward into predicted fact but upward into pure norm. Kelsen's pure theory derives the validity of each legal norm from a higher norm that authorises it, in an ascending chain that must terminate, on pain of regress, in a presupposed *basic norm*, the *Grundnorm*, which is not itself posited by any higher authority but assumed as the transcendental-logical condition of regarding the whole order as valid (Kelsen 1967). The Grundnorm is a presupposition, bracketing both morality and fact, a purely normative postulate at the apex of a purely normative structure.

Set beside Hart, the contrast is exact and instructive. Hart's rule of recognition is an accepted social fact, something officials actually do; Kelsen's Grundnorm is a presupposed symbolic posit, something one must assume. And the diagnosis the paper offers of Kelsen follows immediately: Kelsen lodges the anchor of validity in the purest possible point of the Symbolic, a posit suspended from nothing, held up by nothing but the decision to presuppose it. This is the most elegant of the positions and, by the paper's lights, the most fragile under the conditions the symptomatology described. For a foundation that consists in a pure symbolic presupposition is exactly what the crisis of the symbol dissolves: let the presupposition cease to be made — let people stop assuming the basic norm — and the whole towering normative structure, having no other support, hangs in the void. Kelsen is the limiting case of an anchor lodged in the Symbolic alone, and the crisis of trust is precisely the condition under which an anchor so lodged goes to zero (§4.3.1).

4.4.7 The concrete instrument: from consideration to reliance

The migration of the anchor is not only a movement in high theory; the law records it, with documentary precision, in the technical doctrines of contract, and these are the most directly relevant of all, for they bear on exactly the instrument from which the paper set

out, the bare and unenforceable promise. The orthodox doctrine of *consideration* holds that a bare promise—a promise for which nothing is given in exchange—is not enforceable; for a promise to bind, there must be a bargained-for exchange, a quid pro quo. The bare promise, the gratuitous undertaking, the memorandum that records an intention without exchanging anything—this is the precise legal situation of the betrothal document and of the memorandum of understanding alike: a promise the orthodox doctrine declines to enforce because nothing was given for it.

But the law developed an exception, and the exception is, for this paper, a quiet vindication from within the law itself. Under the doctrine of *promissory estoppel*, a promise unsupported by consideration may nonetheless be enforced where the promisee has reasonably relied upon it, has acted to his detriment in that reliance, and would suffer injustice if the promise were not honoured. The ground of the binding force here is neither consideration nor any threat of sanction: it is *reliance itself*. Because the promisee trusted the promise and made himself vulnerable in that trust, the promise acquires a binding force it did not have as a bare promise—a force generated by the trust placed in it, not by anything exchanged for it or any sword behind it. This is the mirror, in the law of contract, of the self-committing channel of §4.6: the promisee's reliance is a placing of oneself in vulnerability, and the law responds to that vulnerability by generating an obligation to protect it. The associated measure, the *reliance interest*—Fuller and Perdue's classic identification of the interest in being protected against the losses one suffers through having relied, as distinct from the expectation and restitution interests (L. L. Fuller and Perdue 1936)—is the law's own name for the harm of a trust betrayed.

The significance is large and should be stated plainly. At its own technical edge, in the doctrine of promissory estoppel, the law has conceded that the true ground of a promise's binding force is reliance—is trust—and that enforcement is only the after-the-fact protection of a trust that was already, in itself and before any enforcement, the thing that bound. Promissory estoppel is the law's spontaneous, internal corroboration of this paper's central thesis: not a doctrine the paper imports to support its claim, but a place where the law, reasoning about its own most basic instrument, arrived at the claim by itself.

4.4.8 The migration in one view

The eight positions, read along the single axis of the anchor of validity, compose one directional movement. The law's own reflection upon itself has carried the anchor from force (Austin, Hobbes), through acceptance (Hart), to the reciprocal relation of reliance (Fuller, and the doctrine of promissory estoppel), with the predictive and the purely normative held at the two counter-coordinates (Holmes, Kelsen) that mark the limits the movement leaves behind. The paper does not impose this movement from outside; it traces an undercurrent already present in the law and connects it to the diagnosis of the symbol's crisis and, in §4.6, to the mechanism of trust—giving the movement the full causal grounding the law itself, lacking a mechanistic vocabulary, could mark but not explain. The consequence is that this chapter is not mere background but an independent pillar of the argument: it establishes, from within the philosophy of law, that the anchor of validity is migrating from force toward trust, so that the metaphysics of §4.5 and the mechanism of §4.6 are not free-standing philosophical or scientific assertions but the grounding explanation of a movement the law has already, on its own, undergone. Three lines—the law's internal undercurrent, the metaphysics of inferential cause, and the predictive-coding mechanism—converge on a single proposition: that it is trust, and not force, that is the true cause of obligation.

The whole may be set in one view. The table reads the positions along the axis of the chapter: where each lodges the anchor of validity, which sense of cause it thereby invokes, and what it contributes to, or marks the limit of, the paper's thesis.

Position	Anchor of validity	Sense of cause	Role in the thesis
Austin, Hobbes	the threatened sanction; the sword	mechanical	states the position to be moved from; theory of a pathological limit

Position	Anchor of validity	Sense of cause	Role in the thesis
Hart	convergent acceptance; the internal point of view	inferential (normative)	the hinge: anchor pried loose from force toward acceptance
Fuller	reciprocity; mutual keeping of faith	inferential (relational)	names trust under its legal name; congruence as implicit promise
Habermas, Rawls	legitimate procedure; discourse	inferential (procedural)	isomorphic question: how is legitimacy produced
Holmes, realism	predicted official conduct	mechanical (predictive)	counter-coordinate; portrait of the evidentialist; its limit is Kant's worry
Kelsen	the presupposed basic norm	purely symbolic posit	counter-coordinate; anchor in the Symbolic alone; goes to zero in the crisis
Promissory estoppel	reliance itself	inferential (relational)	the law's own corroboration: reliance, not force, binds

Read down the column of causes, the table shows the chapter's claim in a single glance: the entries that hold the anchor at force are entries of mechanical cause, and they sit at the beginning of the movement and at its abandoned limits; the entries that carry the anchor toward trust are entries of inferential cause, and they are where the law's reflection has been travelling. The migration of the anchor and the distinction between

the two senses of cause are the same movement seen twice. What that inferential cause is, metaphysically — why it is the opening in which freedom itself becomes possible — is the question §4.5 now takes up; how it works, mechanically, is the question of §4.6.

4.5. The Inferential Cause and the Opening for Freedom

The jurisprudential chapter ended with a distinction it had traced through eight positions but not yet examined: between the mechanical cause, in which the anchor of validity sits at the beginning of the law's movement and at its abandoned limits, and the inferential cause, toward which that movement has been travelling. The distinction was drawn, in the diagnosis, as a contrast between two ways a result might be produced — the compulsion of a body and the grounding of a mind's expectation. This section asks what the inferential cause *is*, and answers that it is not a weaker species of the mechanical but a different kind altogether, and that the difference is the very opening in which freedom, and with it the moral, becomes possible. The section is short, but it is the load-bearing arch beneath everything the mechanism, the justice criterion, and the praxis will build: it establishes that to generate trust is to address a free being as free, and that the promise which carries no force is, for exactly that reason, not the defective case but the proper one.

4.5.1 Two kinds of cause, not two degrees of one

It is tempting to hear the contrast between mechanical and inferential cause as a contrast of strength — as though the mechanical cause were the reliable kind, which compels its effect outright, and the inferential cause a weaker kind, which merely makes its effect more probable. On that hearing, force would be the gold standard of causation and trust a degraded approximation to it, and the whole movement the jurisprudence traced would be a movement from a strong ground to a weak one, a story of decline. This is the hearing the paper must refuse, and the refusal is the hinge of the section.

The mechanical cause and the inferential cause are not two degrees of one kind of causation; they are two kinds. The mechanical cause operates upon its effect from outside and leaves the effect no part to play: the struck ball does not consent to move, contributes nothing to its own motion, could not have done otherwise given the impact. Its paradigm is the transfer of momentum, and its mark is that the affected thing is passive

throughout—the cause does all the work, and the effect is the mere registration of it. The inferential cause operates altogether differently. It does not push; it gives a ground. It supplies a mind with something on the basis of which that mind may form an expectation—an expectation the mind itself forms, by its own activity, and could, being what it is, have formed otherwise or withheld. The ground does not compel the expectation as the impact compels the motion; it furnishes a reason, and a reason is precisely what a free mind takes up rather than undergoes. Where the mechanical effect is the passive registration of a force, the inferential effect is the active production of an expectation by the one in whom it arises.

This is why the inferential cause is not a weaker mechanical cause but a stronger—or rather a different and higher—thing. It is the only kind of causation that can have a free being for its proper subject, because it is the only kind that addresses that being *as* free: as one who forms his own expectations on grounds, rather than one whose states are pushed into him from without. To produce trust by the inferential cause is to treat the one in whom the trust arises as a mind that judges, not as a mechanism that registers. And the mechanical cause, applied to a mind, does not improve upon this; it degrades it, for to compel an expectation rather than to ground it is to treat the mind, in just that respect, as if it were not a mind at all.

4.5.2 Trust addresses the other as free

The same distinction, looked at from the side of the one who trusts rather than the one who is trusted, is the distinction between two stances one may take toward another person, and it is here that Kant's worry from the diagnosis (§4.3.5) receives its positive answer. One may take toward another the stance of prediction-and-management: treat his future conduct as an outcome to be forecast from evidence and secured by incentive, arrange the consequences so that the conduct one wants is the conduct it is in his interest to produce, and rely upon him exactly as one relies upon any well-understood part of the causal order. This is the stance of Holmes's observer toward the bad man (§4.4.5), and it is, within its proper domain, entirely legitimate; one had better be able to predict and to manage. But it is a stance that takes its object as an object—as a system whose behaviour is determined by conditions one may arrange—and to take *only* this stance toward a person, to model him exhaustively as such a system, is to have ceased, in Kant's

terms, to treat him as an end, and so to have ceased to relate to him as a person at all.

The other stance is the stance of trust proper, and it is the stance of one free being toward another. To trust a person, in the full sense the promise calls for, is not to predict his conduct as one predicts the weather but to rely upon his freely binding himself—to address him as one who can commit himself to a future and can keep faith with that commitment because he has bound himself to it, not because the consequences have been arranged to leave him no alternative. The one who makes a genuine promise is not forecasting his own future behaviour from the inside, as one might forecast a habit; he is committing himself to it, performing the distinctively free act of placing himself under an obligation he could violate and undertaking that he will not. And the one who trusts the promise is wagering, in part, upon that freedom: relying not upon a mechanism that cannot fail but upon a free being who could fail and undertakes not to. The wager on the other's keeping of faith is, irreducibly, a wager on his freedom—and this, which the diagnosis marked as the point at which prediction-and-management changes its object and stops speaking of promising at all, is now seen to be not a softness in the account of trust but its very condition. There is no trusting a being one regards as a mere mechanism; there is only predicting it. Trust begins exactly where prediction is refused as the whole truth, and the other is met as one who is free to keep or to break faith and is relied upon to keep it.

4.5.3 A word on the cognitive basis

That this is a metaphysical and ethical claim does not make it a claim against the natural order, and a word is owed, in anticipation of §4.6, on its cognitive basis, lest the inferential cause seem to require a faculty outside nature. It does not. The forming of expectations on grounds is not an exotic operation a mind performs on rare and solemn occasions; it is the ordinary and incessant business of a brain, which is, on the account the next section develops, a predictive organ before it is anything else, continuously generating expectations of what is to come and revising them against what arrives. Trust, on that account, is not a special faculty superadded to cognition but a particular case of cognition's standing activity: a high-confidence forward expectation about the conduct of another, formed on grounds and held open to revision. The inferential cause has, that is, a perfectly natural implementation; what distinguishes it from the mechanical cause

is not that it floats free of the causal order but that, within that order, it operates by furnishing grounds to a system that forms its own expectations, rather than by compelling a system that merely registers what is done to it. The metaphysics of freedom and the neuroscience of prediction are not at odds; the one is the significance of what the other describes. The section leaves the mechanism to its own chapter and returns to the consequence.

4.5.4 Why the non-coercive promise is the proper case

The consequence is the one the Prelude felt before it could say it, and it can now be said. The promise that carries no force is not the defective limiting case of promising, to be apologised for against the enforceable contract as the standard; it is the proper case, of which the enforceable contract is the derivative. For if trust addresses the other as free, and if to produce trust is to ground a free mind's expectation rather than to compel a mechanism's response, then the promise that relies on no sword is the promise that does this in its purity: it asks to be believed on no ground but the promisor's free commitment and the promisee's free wager upon it, and so it is the form in which the inferential cause operates unmixed. The enforceable promise, by contrast, mixes into this pure case an element of the mechanical: it offers, alongside the free commitment, a threatened consequence, and to exactly that extent it addresses the promisee not as a free mind forming an expectation on the ground of trust but as a calculator forming a prediction on the ground of incentive. The sword does not strengthen the promise as a promise; it supplements the promise with something that is not a promise at all, a managed consequence, and the supplement does its work, where it works, by treating the parties in the very manner that trust refuses.

This is not yet to say — and the paper will be at pains, later, not to say — that the sword should be dispensed with, or that the enforceable contract is in every respect inferior to the bare vow; the protection of the vulnerable, as §4.11 will insist, has a continuing and indispensable need of force. It is to say something narrower and deeper: that in respect of what makes a promise a promise — the addressing of a free being as free, the grounding rather than the compelling of an expectation — the non-coercive promise is the realised case and the coercive one the diluted. The want of force that the Prelude felt as the condition of the vow's being what it was is here given its reason. A bond one could be

forced to keep is, just insofar as one could be forced, not yet fully a bond between free beings; and the vow that asks for no sword is the truer not despite carrying no force but because, carrying none, it leaves the whole of the work to freedom — to the promisor’s free binding of himself and the promisee’s free trust in it. How that work is in fact done — by what mechanism a free mind, addressed as free and given the right grounds, comes to expect that the promise will be kept — is the question the paper has been clearing the ground to ask, and it is the question to which it now turns.

4.6. The Mechanism of Trust

Everything to this point has cleared the ground for a single question and supplied the terms in which it can be asked. The symptomatology displayed a gap between the apparatus of assurance and the trust it failed to secure; the diagnosis traced the gap to a mistake about causation, the taking of the mechanical cause for the cause of an inferential effect; the jurisprudence showed the law’s own anchor migrating, across a century, from force toward trust; and the preceding section established that the inferential cause is a different kind of thing from the mechanical, the kind that addresses a free being as free. What none of these has yet supplied is the positive account: *by what mechanism* a free mind, addressed as free and given the right grounds, comes to expect that a promise about a non-existent future, carrying no guarantee of consequence, will be kept. This section supplies it. It is the trunk of the paper, of which the chapters before were the roots and the chapters after are the branches.

The problem the mechanism must solve has, recall, a shape that looks impossible. Trust is directed at a future that does not yet exist and cannot be verified; the symbol that asks for trust carries no force and so cannot secure the future by threatening a consequence. We are asked to explain how a present expectation, real and often well-founded, is produced by a symbol about what does not exist and under no guarantee — a generation, very nearly, from nothing. The dissolution of the apparent impossibility is the section’s first move, and it is made by reaching for the one vocabulary in the paper’s possession that is native to the forming of expectations about what has not yet arrived: the predictive account of the mind.

4.6.1 Predictive coding and the dissolution of the paradox

The brain, on the predictive account that has become central to the cognitive sciences, is not in the first instance a device that registers the world and then responds to it; it is a device that *predicts* the world and corrects its predictions against what arrives (Friston 2010; Clark 2013; Hohwy 2013). It carries a generative model of the causes of its sensory states, continually generates expectations of what is to come, compares them against incoming signals, and updates the model in proportion to the error — and in proportion, crucially, to the *precision*, the inverse variance, it assigns to that error and to its own predictions. Prediction, on this account, is not an occasional achievement but the standing activity of the organ; the mind is forward-directed by its nature, expecting before it perceives.

This dissolves the apparent paradox at a stroke. The objection was that trust is impossible because its object — the kept future — does not yet exist; how can a present state be produced by an absent fact? But the objection assumes that an expectation must be caused by the thing expected, and the predictive account shows this assumption false. An expectation is not caused by its object; it is produced, *now*, by the generative model, as the model's forward prediction, in advance of and independent of the object's arrival. Forward-directed expectation under uncertainty is not a special feat trust must somehow accomplish against the grain of cognition; it is what cognition is incessantly doing anyway. Trust requires no time machine, no causation running backward from a future that does not exist. It requires only what the brain does in every waking moment: the assignment, by a generative model, of a high-precision prediction — here, the prediction that this person will keep this promise. *Trust is the high precision a receiver's generative model assigns to the prediction that the promise will be kept.* The expectation of legal possibility that the diagnosis spoke of is, at the level of mechanism, exactly this: a precision-weighted forward prediction, a quantity the brain natively computes, and not a metaphor borrowed from the law.

The question of how trust is generated thus becomes a precise question: by what *inputs* does a receiver's generative model come to assign high precision to the prediction that a promise will be kept? The paper's answer is that there are three such inputs, three channels, and that they correspond — not by coincidence but because the registers are the

registers of one subject — to the three registers the series has worked with throughout.

4.6.2 The three channels

The three channels are distinct in what they supply to the generative model, and the paper takes them in the order of the registers: the structural, lodged in the symbolic; the self-committing, lodged in the real; and the wagered, lodged in the imaginary and the subject who wagers.

The structural channel: the prior

The first channel supplies a *prior*. A promise is not received in a vacuum; it is received with a structure, and the structure of the promise shapes the receiver's prior expectation before any evidence about this particular promisor is weighed. A vow with the form of a closed and self-completing commitment — one that, in the language of §4.7, returns upon itself without leaving a debt to be discharged elsewhere — presents to the receiver's model a structural prior favourable to its being kept, in a way that a loose, hedged, escape-laden form does not. This is the cognitive function of what the series has called the poetic structure of a commitment: the form is not ornament but information, a shaper of the prior the receiver brings to bear. At the scale of institutions this is the channel of Hart's convergent acceptance and the rule of recognition (§4.4.2): a shared structural prior, sustained by being shared, against which each new undertaking is read. The structural channel is lodged in the symbolic, for it works through the form of the symbol; and it is, taken alone, the most forgeable of the three, since a form can be imitated.

The self-committing channel: the high-fidelity likelihood

The second channel supplies a *likelihood* — and, where it works, a high-fidelity one. Here the promisor does not merely present a form; he does something. He places himself, really and observably, in a position of vulnerability from which retreat is costly or foreclosed: he binds himself in a manner that will hurt him to break, gives a hostage, burns a bridge, commits himself irrevocably and in the sight of others. And the receiver's generative model reads this for what, statistically, it is. A signal that is costly and hard to reverse carries a high precision-weight, because it is one a promisor who did *not* intend to keep

faith would be very unlikely to send: the cost of sending it, for the insincere, is prohibitive, and so its being sent is strong evidence of sincerity. This is the mechanism beneath the red silk, the public setting, the burning of one's boats—the irrevocable and costly self-binding the Prelude began with. Such acts are not arguments; they do not persuade by inference from premises. They furnish the receiver's model with a high-fidelity, hard-to-forge likelihood signal, evidence of a kind the body reads before the discourse does, that the one who could so bind himself must mean it.

The paper takes up here, and gives a mechanistic basis to, the costly-signalling principle familiar from the theory of signalling in biology and economics: that a signal too expensive for a defector to afford is, for that reason, credible. What predictive coding adds is the implementation—the costly, irrevocable signal is precisely one to which a generative model rationally assigns high precision—and a deeper observation the paper will not exhaust here but must mark. The burning of the bridge has been described, just now, in its aspect as a *signal*: as something done to be read by another, furnishing his model with evidence. But this is only one of its two faces, and not the deeper. There is a second sense in which one burns a bridge that has nothing to do with being read by anyone—in which one forecloses one's own retreat not to send a message but to constitute, for oneself, a law: *I have decreed it so, and so that road no longer exists for me*. This deeper sense, in which the irrevocable self-binding is an act of self-legislation rather than of signalling, is the matter of §4.12, and in particular of its account of relational divinity; it is marked here, at the mechanism, so that the reader who reaches it will recognise that the trunk was pointing toward it all along. For the present chapter the self-committing channel is treated in its signalling aspect: as the high-fidelity likelihood lodged in the real, the channel through which a real act of self-exposure, received by another present to read it, supplies the model with its least forgeable evidence.

The wagered channel: the prior leap of active inference

The third channel is the most easily mistaken for irrationality and is, properly understood, the deepest. It concerns not what the promisor supplies but what the receiver does: the receiver, in trusting, makes a leap that precedes the evidence. He assigns, in advance of sufficient warrant, a high-precision prior to the prediction that the other will keep faith—he ventures the trust—and only then, through the continued interaction the venture

makes possible, gathers the error signals by which the model is confirmed or corrected. This looks like a failure of rationality: the trust is given before the evidence that would justify it. But on the active-inference reading it is not a failure of rationality at all. An agent does not merely passively update a model against incoming data; it acts so as to reduce its own uncertainty over the longer run, and there are states of knowledge attainable only by first acting under uncertainty—only by venturing. Trust is such a venture. One cannot gather the evidence that would warrant trusting a person without first entering the kind of interaction that only trusting him makes possible; the evidence lies on the far side of a threshold one can cross only by trusting in advance of it. The leap of trust is thus the rational opening move of an agent that reduces uncertainty by acting—a prior wager that is the precondition of acquiring the very evidence that will vindicate or correct it. This channel is lodged in the imaginary and in the wagering subject, for its source is not in the symbol’s form nor in the promisor’s act but in the receiver’s free venturing; and it is here, in the wager that the other will prove free and faithful, that the freedom of §4.5 re-enters the mechanism.

4.6.3 The multiplicative coupling

The three channels are not three alternative routes to trust, of which a promisor might supply one and be believed. They are coupled, and coupled *multiplicatively*—as the factors of a single Bayesian product are coupled, in which the structural prior, the self-committing likelihood, and the wagered prior combine into the posterior precision of the prediction that the promise will be kept. The point of multiplicative rather than additive coupling is exact and it is the heart of the section: in a product, if any factor goes to zero the whole product goes to zero, and no abundance in the other factors can compensate. A perfect form with no real self-commitment behind it; a costly act with no wager that the other is free to be faithful; a leap of trust met by neither form nor self-binding—each is a product with a vanishing factor, and each fails as a ground of well-founded trust.

This is why genuine trust is robust where any single channel would be fragile. A single channel can be forged: a form can be imitated, a costly-looking act can be staged, a credulous wager can be exploited. But the three channels are hard to forge *together*, because they are answerable to one another—the structural form must be borne out by a real self-commitment, which must in turn be the kind of thing a free agent would do and

would invite a wager upon—and their mutual consistency, the agreement of form with act with wager, is far harder to counterfeit than any one of them alone. The strength of genuine trust is not the strength of its strongest channel but the improbability of all three being made to agree falsely. This is what coupling means here, and why it is the source of trust that is not merely felt but well-founded.

The mechanism of trust. The expectation that a non-coercive promise will be kept is the posterior precision a receiver’s generative model assigns to that prediction, formed by the multiplicative coupling of three inputs: a structural prior, supplied by the form of the commitment (the symbolic register); a high-fidelity likelihood, supplied by the promisor’s real, costly, irrevocable self-binding (the real register); and a prior wager, supplied by the receiver’s free venturing of trust in advance of the evidence (the imaginary register, and the wagering subject). Genuine trust is the state in which all three are present, real, and mutually consistent; and its well-foundedness rests on the improbability of all three being made to agree falsely.

4.6.4 The forged case, mechanically described

The mechanism furnishes, as a by-product, an exact characterisation of its own counterfeit, which §4.8 will take up as the matter of justice and which is set out here in its mechanical form. Forged trust is the state in which the receiver’s generative model is brought to assign high precision to the prediction that the promise will be kept *without* the real self-committing likelihood that alone would warrant it. The manipulator does precisely this: by working on the receiver’s model directly—by affective pressure, by the staging of forms, by rhetorical management—he induces a lowering of the receiver’s prediction error, a high-precision prediction, that is not supported by any real self-binding on his part. The precision is, as it were, injected from outside rather than earned by a genuine likelihood; and a precision so injected is a prediction unsupported by what it predicts, a confidence with nothing real beneath it.

The mechanical mark of manipulation can therefore be stated with some sharpness: **to manipulate is to induce the other’s generative model to lower its prediction error without supplying the high-fidelity likelihood that would warrant the lowering.** Such a state is unstable in a way genuine trust is not. Because no real self-commitment underlies it, the world will not in fact behave as the injected precision predicts; the error signals will accumulate, the model will be forced toward correction, and the divergence between the predicted and the actual will widen until the forged precision collapses—the process the series has elsewhere described, in its dynamical register, as the accumulation of deviation toward divergence under a non-adiabatic extraction. The forged case is thus not a stable alternative form of trust but a transient, a precision held up by pressure rather than by likelihood, destined for the collapse that the absence of a real ground guarantees.

4.6.5 The crisis of the symbol, in predictive-coding terms

The same vocabulary yields, finally, a precise rendering of the diagnosis of §4.3, and shows the crisis of the symbol to be not a moral decline but a rational adjustment. Consider the population of generative models that is a society, each learning, from its own commerce with symbols, the statistical relation between symbolic signals and real performance. As the cost of producing a convincing symbol falls toward zero and forged signals proliferate (the generativity paradox of §4.3.3), each model learns, correctly, that the correlation between symbolic testimony and real performance has weakened—that the signal has become, in fact, less predictive of the outcome. And the rational Bayesian response to a signal that has become less predictive is to *lower the precision-weight assigned to it*. Each model, updating as it should, down-weights symbolic testimony as such; and because the down-weighting is applied to the channel and not to the individual signal, it falls upon the genuine symbol along with the forged. The genuine vow, the true recommendation, the sincere assurance—each is met by a model that has rationally learned to trust symbols of its kind less, and so each fails to land, not because it is disbelieved in particular but because the channel it travels has been rationally discounted.

This is the crisis of the symbol given its mechanism. It is not that people have become cynical, or that values have decayed; it is that a population of well-functioning generative models, faced with a channel that forgery has made less reliable, has rationally collapsed

the precision-weight it assigns to that channel — and that the retreat to the merely countable (§4.2.3) is the same population’s attempt to reconstruct a high-fidelity likelihood out of signals that are, at least, harder to forge. The crisis is a rational precision collapse at the scale of a population, and that is both why it is so intractable — for each model is only doing what it should — and why the remedy, as the rest of the paper develops it, cannot be a return to symbolic profession but must lie in the channels, the self-committing and the relational, that forgery cannot so easily saturate.

4.6.6 Connection to the computational programme of the foundational paper

It is worth marking, before the chapter closes, that the mechanism dovetails with the formal programme the foundational paper held open. That paper sketched, as a direction for future work, a computational study of justice as generative presence, in which justice would figure as an observable evaluated over a space of histories, formalised in the manner of a path integral (Wanhong 2025). The predictive-coding mechanism of trust is a concrete realisation, for the case of trust, of exactly this form: trust is the precision a generative model assigns to a prediction evaluated over the space of the promisor’s possible future trajectories, an expectation taken over histories. The two formal programmes mesh — the observable-over-histories of the foundational paper and the precision-over-trajectories of the present mechanism are the same kind of object — and the meshing is noted here so that the formal continuity of the series is on the record, to be drawn upon rather than re-derived.

4.6.7 A discipline of honesty

The chapter must end where the series requires it to, with an express discipline upon the use it has made of the predictive account, lest the mechanism be taken for more than it is. Predictive coding has been used here as a *mechanistic and structural model*, not as a reductive claim about what trust ultimately is. The paper does not assert that trust simply *is* a precision-weighting and nothing more. What predictive coding supplies is a description at Marr’s computational and implementational levels — an account of what the system computes and how it might compute it — and such a description does not displace the others the paper has given and will give: the phenomenological description of the vulnerability of self-commitment, the jurisprudential description of force as a substi-

tute for expectation, the ethical description of the difference between genuine and forged. These are descriptions of one object at different levels, and the predictive-coding account is one of them, not the truth beneath them all. It is not a meta-framework that absorbs the rest; it is one more irreducible position on a single object, and the polyphonic discipline of the series—that no framework govern the others—holds over it as over every other. The mechanism is offered, then, as the paper’s central contribution and not as its last word: a specification of how, at the level of the computing mind, the inferential cause does its work, which leaves standing, beside it, everything the other registers have to say about the same thing.

4.7. The Holonomy Interface

The mechanism of §4.6 was given in the vocabulary of prediction and precision. This section gives the same mechanism a second reading, in the geometric vocabulary the series has developed elsewhere—the vocabulary of holonomy, of the phase a system accumulates in traversing a closed path. The second reading is not a rival to the first but its complement: where the predictive account describes what the receiving mind computes, the geometric account describes the *shape* of the process by which a promise, held across time, either sustains the trust placed in it or drains it away. The two readings will be seen to converge, and their convergence prepares two later moments of the paper: the quantum-dynamical structure of relational trust (§4.9), for the geometric phase is, in its origin, a concept of quantum dynamics; and the inversion of value by which the non-binding vow proves the purer instrument (§4.12), for that inversion turns on exactly the distinction this section now draws.

A discipline must be stated at the outset, as it was for the mechanism. The geometric phase is employed here as a *structural analogy*, developed to the point of usefulness but not to full formal closure; the formal programme that would furnish the phase with a rigorous carrier, a definite fibre and connection, is carried by another paper of the series, to which the present section forward-refers rather than reproducing it. What is claimed here is that the structure of a promise sustained across time is the structure of a system transported around a closed loop, and that the distinction between a promise that generates trust and one that drains it is the distinction between a loop that accumulates

a positive holonomy and one that accumulates none or a negative one. The claim is structural; its full formalisation lies elsewhere.

4.7.1 Trust as a quantity transported around a loop

Consider a promise not at the instant of its making but across the time of its keeping. A relation in which a vow has been made returns, again and again, to situations that resemble the situation of the vow: occasions on which the commitment is tested, recalled, re-enacted, or merely lived through—the daily, monthly, yearly recurrences in which what was promised is, or is not, borne out. The relation thus traces, across its time, a closed loop in a space of situations: it departs from the moment of the vow, passes through the varied circumstances of a shared life, and returns to situations that are, in the relevant respect, the same situation again. The question the geometric reading asks is what the relation *brings back* when it returns. Does it return to the situation of the vow unchanged, having merely gone around and come back? Or does it return having accumulated something—a deepening, a surplus, a phase that was not there at the start?

This is the question of holonomy. A system transported around a closed loop in a space with the right structure does not, in general, return to its starting state; it returns rotated, shifted, carrying a phase that records the path it took—the geometric phase, the anholonomy, of which the Berry phase and the Pancharatnam phase are the canonical instances (Berry 1984; Pancharatnam 1956). The phase is not a function of where the system ended—it ended where it began—but of the loop it traversed to get back: it is the trace, in the returned state, of the journey. And the sign and magnitude of that phase is exactly the distinction the series has used to tell a good cycle from a bad. A loop that returns its system unchanged has zero holonomy: it has gone around and come back to the same place with nothing to show for the going, the mere repetition the series has called the bad infinity. A loop that returns its system enriched, carrying a positive phase, has positive holonomy: it has returned to its root and yet come back as more, the spiral rather than the circle. And a loop that returns its system depleted, having leaked phase rather than gained it, has negative holonomy: the cycle of net extraction, the relation that winds down. hol of the loop, the holonomy of the relation’s traversal, is the geometric measure of whether the promise, lived across time, deepens, repeats, or drains.

4.7.2 The non-coercive promise as positive, adiabatic holonomy

The non-coercive promise, kept, is the loop of positive holonomy, and it is so in the specific manner the geometric phase requires: *adiabatically*. The geometric phase is the phase accumulated by a system carried around its loop slowly enough that it is not driven by the transport but follows it, exchanging no energy with its surroundings, its evolution governed from within rather than pumped from without. This adiabatic condition is the geometric image of exactly what §4.5 called the inferential cause and §4.6 called the self-committing and wagered channels. The promise kept without a sword is kept adiabatically: its loop is closed not by an external compulsion driving the parties around it but by the parties' own commitment, sustained from within, returning upon itself by the completeness of what each freely brings to it. Nothing external pumps the cycle; the parties are not driven around the loop by a threatened consequence; the closure is endogenous, and the phase it accumulates is, for that reason, a true geometric phase—a deepening generated by the loop's own internal structure, the surplus the series has identified with the good cycle. The non-coercive promise is the adiabatic loop of positive holonomy: trust sustained and deepened by the relation's own internal completeness, requiring no external pump to hold it closed.

This gives the geometric content of the claim of §4.5, that the promise without force is the proper case and not the defective one. In the geometric vocabulary, the want of an external pump is not a deficiency of the loop but the condition of its phase being geometric at all. A phase that is pumped from outside is not a geometric phase; it is a dynamical phase, driven by the energy fed in, and it is not the trace of the loop's own structure but of the driving. The adiabatic loop—the one no external force drives—is the only one whose accumulated phase is purely the loop's own; and so the promise that relies on no sword is the only one whose deepening is genuinely its own, generated from within rather than supplied from without. The geometric reading thus recovers, in its own terms, the result that the absence of force is the condition of the promise's deepening being the promise's own.

4.7.3 Debt and the coerced contract as the zero-holonomy line

The contrast that throws this into relief is the coerced contract, and behind it the structure of debt, which the geometric reading exposes as something quite different from a loop. A debt is not a cycle that returns upon itself and deepens; it is a line, drawn from a present that is mortgaged to a future that must discharge it. The debtor does not traverse a loop that brings back a surplus; he is held, by the threat of the sanction, on a track that runs from the incurring of the obligation to its forced discharge, and the track is held straight — prevented from closing into any loop of its own — by the external force that drives it. This is the geometric image of the coerced contract and of debt as its limit: a path held open and directed by an external pump, accumulating no geometric phase because it is not permitted to close upon itself, its motion not the endogenous traversal of a loop but the driven progress along a line.

Where such a path is forced into the appearance of a cycle — where a coerced relation is made to repeat — its holonomy is zero or negative, never the positive phase of the adiabatic loop. Zero, in the case of mere forced repetition: the relation goes around and comes back to the same place, the obligation discharged and re-incurred, with nothing brought back, because the closure was imposed from outside and the loop accumulated no phase of its own — the bad infinity of a cycle held shut by force. Negative, in the case of net extraction: where the external pump drives the loop so as to draw phase out of it, the relation winds down, depleted turn by turn, the structure the series has identified with the parasitic and the exploitative. The coerced relation cannot accumulate positive holonomy, because positive holonomy is the signature of an adiabatic, endogenously closed loop, and the coerced relation is precisely the one that is not adiabatic: it is pumped from without, and a pumped loop's phase is not its own. The sword, on this reading, does not merely fail to deepen the bond; it forecloses the deepening, by substituting a driven line or a forced repetition for the free, adiabatic loop that alone could deepen.

4.7.4 The spectral gap and the 甘え problem

There is a further structure the geometric reading illuminates, which the series left open in its treatment of 甘え — of the sweet, regressive presuming-upon-another's-indulgence whose ambivalence that discussion could mark but not resolve. The unresolved question

there was where, in the space of a relation's possible motions, the line falls between a presuming-upon-another that the relation can absorb and metabolise, returning it as deepened intimacy, and a presuming-upon-another that the relation cannot absorb, which accumulates as deviation and drives the cycle toward divergence. The geometric reading offers the missing structure, in the form of a spectral gap. A loop's capacity to absorb a perturbation and return adiabatically to its closed traversal—rather than being driven by the perturbation onto a divergent path—depends on a gap in the spectrum of the dynamics governing the loop: a perturbation slower than the gap is followed adiabatically and metabolised into the loop's own phase, while a perturbation faster than the gap drives the system across the gap, out of the adiabatic regime, onto a trajectory that no longer closes. The benign 甘え is the perturbation the loop can follow adiabatically, absorbed into a deepened holonomy; the corrosive 甘え is the perturbation that exceeds the gap, driving the relation non-adiabatically toward the accumulation of deviation and divergence that §4.6.4 described in the predictive register as the collapse of a forged precision. The spectral gap is the structure that was missing; it is offered here as the geometric correlate of the relation's capacity to bear what is presumed upon it, and the point at which the present paper repays, in part, a debt the earlier discussion left standing.

4.7.5 The convergence of the two readings

The geometric reading and the predictive reading of §4.6 are, in the end, one account seen twice, and their convergence is worth stating plainly, for it is what licenses the use of both. The adiabatic, endogenously closed loop of positive holonomy is the geometric portrait of the relation whose trust is sustained by the three coupled channels from within, requiring no external pump—the genuine case. The driven line, and the forced loop of zero or negative holonomy, is the geometric portrait of the relation whose precision is injected from without rather than earned by a real likelihood—the coerced case and the forged case alike. What the predictive reading describes as a precision earned by a real self-committing likelihood versus a precision injected by external pressure, the geometric reading describes as a phase accumulated by an adiabatic loop versus a phase pumped into a driven path; and these are the same distinction, the distinction between a process governed from within and one driven from without, rendered in two vocabularies. That

the two independent readings converge on the same line—between the endogenous and the pumped, the adiabatic and the driven, the genuine and the forged—is the strongest internal evidence the paper can offer that the line is real and not an artefact of either vocabulary.

This convergence carries forward in two directions the paper will take up. It points toward §4.9, where the recognition that the geometric phase is, in its origin, a concept of quantum dynamics—the Berry phase being the phase of an adiabatically transported quantum state—allows the geometric language used here to be seen for what it has been all along, a borrowing from the dynamics of which relational trust will there be shown to share the structure. And it points toward §4.12, where the distinction between the adiabatic loop, whose phase is its own, and the pumped path, whose phase is borrowed, becomes the geometric ground of the inversion by which the non-binding vow—the loop that relies on no external pump—proves the purer realisation of what a promise is, and the enforceable instrument, with its admixture of the external pump, the diluted one.

4.8. The Justice Criterion: Genuine and Forged Trust

The mechanism of §4.6 furnished, as a by-product, a mechanical characterisation of its own counterfeit: forged trust as a precision injected from without rather than earned by a real self-committing likelihood, and the geometric reading of §4.7 gave the same counterfeit its geometric form, as a phase pumped into a driven path rather than accumulated by an adiabatic loop. But the mechanical and the geometric characterisations are, by themselves, value-neutral. They tell us that the forged case is unstable—that a precision unsupported by likelihood will be overtaken by accumulating error, that a phase pumped from outside is not the loop’s own—but instability is not yet injustice, and a transient is not yet a wrong. This section makes the further claim: that the line between genuine and forged trust, which the mechanism drew as a line between the stable and the unstable, is also and irreducibly a line of justice, between a way of producing trust that honours the one in whom it is produced and a way that wrongs him. The claim is that these two lines—the mechanical and the ethical—coincide, and the section’s task is to say why they coincide without pretending that either is derivable from the other.

4.8.1 Why the ethical criterion is not derivable from the mechanism

It must be said first what the section does *not* claim, for the series' discipline requires it and the temptation to overreach is real. It does not claim that the wrongness of forged trust follows from its instability — that the forged case is unjust *because* it is destined to collapse. That would be to derive an ethical conclusion from a dynamical premise, to read a wrong off a trajectory, and the series has been at pains throughout to keep these orthogonal. The mechanism answers a dynamical question: will this trust survive, is it well-founded, will the error signals confirm or refute it. The justice criterion answers a different question, which no amount of dynamical information settles: is this a way of treating the other that honours him or wrongs him. A forged trust that happened, against the odds, to be stable — a manipulation that was never found out, a pumped phase that never collapsed — would be no less a wrong for its stability; and a genuine trust that collapsed through no one's fault — a real self-commitment overtaken by circumstance — would be no less honourable for its collapse. The two criteria can be made to agree, and the section will argue that at the limit they do; but they are not the same criterion, and the agreement is a substantive finding rather than a definitional identity. This is the orthogonality the series has insisted upon elsewhere, between the question of whether a cycle lives and the question of whether it is just, and it holds here in the form: the mechanism tells whether the trust stands, the justice criterion tells whether it should have been produced as it was.

4.8.2 The single line, drawn ethically

With that established, the coincidence can be drawn. The mechanical mark of manipulation was stated in §4.6.4: to induce the other's generative model to lower its prediction error without supplying the high-fidelity likelihood that would warrant the lowering. The ethical mark of manipulation is the same act described under a different aspect, and the section names three aspects of the one act, each of which is a way the manipulation wrongs the one manipulated.

The first aspect is epistemic. To induce in another a high-precision prediction unsupported by any real likelihood is to corrupt his capacity to predict the world truly — to install in his model a confidence that the world will not bear out, and so to set him at odds

with his own future experience. The manipulated person is not merely deceived about a particular fact; his instrument for forming expectations has been tampered with, made to deliver a precision the evidence does not warrant, so that he is rendered, in just this respect, a worse knower than he was. Manipulation is an injury to the other's epistemic autonomy: it does not persuade him by giving him grounds he can weigh, which would leave his judgment intact and free; it works on his model from outside, behind the back of his judgment, to produce in him an expectation he did not form on grounds and could not have refused. This is the precise epistemic sense in which manipulation differs from honest persuasion, and it is a difference the mechanism makes exact: persuasion supplies a likelihood the other's model may weigh and accept or reject; manipulation injects a precision the model did not earn and cannot examine.

The second aspect is the Kantian, and it returns the paper to the distinction of §4.5. To produce trust by injecting precision rather than by supplying a real self-committing likelihood is to treat the other not as a free mind forming its own expectations on grounds but as a mechanism whose states are to be arranged from outside—to apply to him the mechanical cause rather than the inferential, to manage him rather than to address him. It is, in the terms of the second formulation of the categorical imperative, to treat him merely as a means: as an object whose predictive states one engineers toward one's own ends, rather than as an end in himself who forms his expectations freely and could withhold them (Kant 1998). The genuine production of trust, by contrast, addresses the other exactly as §4.5 required: it supplies him with a real ground—a costly, irrevocable self-commitment—which his free judgment may take up, and it leaves the taking-up to him. The difference between genuine and forged trust is thus, in its second aspect, the difference between addressing a free being as free and handling a free being as a mechanism; and this is why the forged case is not merely a technical defect in the production of trust but a wrong done to the one in whom it is produced.

The third aspect is the one the series has carried from its work on generative justice, and it is the deepest, for it names what the manipulator does with the relation as a whole. To manipulate is to treat the other's trust as *fuel*—to draw upon his capacity to rely, his openness to being committed-to, as a resource to be consumed for an end that is not his and from which he is excluded. The forged relation is one in which the trusting party

is rendered a mere means to a value that returns to the manipulator and not to him: his trust is mined, his vulnerability is exploited, and he is positioned in the cycle as the one who supplies what others consume. This is the criterion the series has stated as the question to be put to any cycle that deepens: is there someone within it who figures only as a cost, excluded from the return—is there one who is rendered mere fuel? Forged trust answers yes; it is the production of an expectation whose function is to extract from the one who holds it, and who is, in the holding, used up. Genuine trust answers no; it is the production of an expectation that opens a relation in which the trusting party is a beneficiary and not merely a source, in which what is generated returns to the one whose trust made it possible. The justice of trust, in this third and deepest aspect, is the justice of the return: genuine trust returns to the one who gives it, forged trust extracts from him.

4.8.3 The three aspects are one

These three—the epistemic injury, the Kantian reduction, and the rendering-as-fuel—are not three separate wrongs that manipulation happens to commit together; they are three aspects of a single act, the act the mechanism described as the injection of unwarranted precision. To inject precision without likelihood just *is* to corrupt the other's knowing (the epistemic aspect), which just is to bypass his free judgment and handle him as a mechanism (the Kantian aspect), which just is to position him as a source to be drawn upon rather than a partner in a return (the aspect of fuel). The mechanism gave the act its mechanical description; the three aspects give the one act its ethical description; and that the mechanical and the ethical descriptions are descriptions of the same act is why the line the mechanism drew and the line justice draws coincide. They coincide not because the one is derived from the other—the section began by refusing that—but because they are two descriptions, at two levels, of one and the same thing: the producing of an expectation in another without the real self-commitment that would honour him in the producing of it.

4.8.4 The criterion stated, and what it leaves to practice

The criterion may now be stated in a form the rest of the paper will use. **Genuine trust is an expectation produced in another by supplying a real ground his**

free judgment may take up, and which opens a relation that returns to him; forged trust is an expectation induced in another by injecting a precision his judgment cannot examine, which handles him as a mechanism and draws upon him as fuel. The criterion is, as the series requires, a criterion of justice laid alongside the criterion of dynamics, not derived from it: the mechanism tells whether an expectation will stand, the criterion tells whether it was rightly produced, and the two must each be applied, neither collapsing into the other.

One consequence must be marked, for it sets the problem the praxis will have to solve and guards against a misreading the rest of the paper cannot afford. The genuine and the forged are not, as outward performances, reliably distinguishable. The manipulator who stages a costly-looking commitment and the sincere promisor who makes a real one may, in the moment, present indistinguishable surfaces; the injected precision and the earned precision may, for a time, feel the same from inside. What distinguishes them is not a difference in the performance but a difference in what lies behind it — whether there is, in fact, a real self-commitment and a real return, or only their appearance. This is why the line, though sharp in principle, is treacherous in practice, and why the production of genuine trust cannot be reduced to the production of its signs: the signs can be forged, and the difference that matters is precisely the one the signs do not, by themselves, reveal. The translation of sincerity across the borders of epistemology (§4.10) and the praxis of trust (§4.12) are, in large part, the working-out of how one acts well under exactly this condition — that the genuine must be produced and offered in a world where its signs are indistinguishable from the forged, and where the difference, though real, is not on the surface to be read. The criterion of justice tells us what the difference is; it falls to practice to live by a difference one cannot, from the outside, simply see.

4.9. Relational Trust

The mechanism of §4.6 described how trust is generated between a promisor and a receiver who are present to one another: the structural form, the costly self-binding, the wagered leap, all presuppose two parties in some direct relation. But a great part of the trust on which human dealing actually runs is not of this direct kind. We trust people we have never met, on the strength of others we do trust; trust travels along the links of a

relational network, reaching where no direct relation reaches. This section is about that transmitted trust — *relational trust* — its mechanism, its peculiar liability to a failure the direct case does not suffer, and the formal structure it shares, the section will argue, with the dynamics of an open quantum system. It is the chapter in which the problem of winning a family's trust, posed in the Prelude, finds the resource that bears most directly upon it; and it is the chapter in which the crisis of the symbol receives a new and precise specification.

4.9.1 The mechanism of transmission: the recommendation and the chain

The clearest instance of relational trust is the letter of recommendation, and it repays close mechanical attention, for it shows what is really at work and what is not. The naive view is that a recommendation works by the *content* of what the recommender says — by the predicates he applies to the candidate, the praise he heaps, the qualities he affirms. But this is very largely not what carries the trust. The adjectives carry almost no information; everyone is described in superlatives, and a committee that has read a thousand letters extracts nothing from the thousand-and-first profession of excellence (§4.2.3). What actually works is not the content but the *structure*: a committee C trusts the judgment of a recommender A , with whom it has a relation of trust; the recommender A has a real working coupling with the candidate B , knows B from the inside, has the embodied knowledge of what B can do; and trust is transmitted along the chain $C-A-B$, C coming to trust B *through* its trust in A . The recommendation works as a conductor, not as a description: it carries C 's existing trust in A across the link $A-B$ to reach B , whom C has no other way to reach.

What this reveals is that trust, in the relational case, is not a property of any single party at all. It is not something in B , nor in A , nor in C ; it is a property of the *structure of the relation* among them — a topological property of the network, residing in the pattern of couplings rather than in any node. C has no direct evidence about B (the evidentialist channel cannot reach), and no direct contact with B (the deontological reading of character cannot reach); yet C can trust B , and the trust exists nowhere but in the chain. Relational trust is thus a third mechanism, irreducible to the evidential and the characterological alike, by which trust reaches across a gap that neither evidence nor the direct reading of character could span. And it bears directly on the predicament of

the Prelude: the trust a family extends to a stranger who would marry into it runs, very largely, not through anything the stranger can show them directly, but through the chain that connects him to them by way of the one they already love and trust — the one who loves him is, in the structure of the network, his recommender, and the trust reaches him along that link or not at all.

4.9.2 Relational trust spans the three registers

Relational trust is not lodged in one register but spans all three, and this is the key to both its power and its specific fragility. There is an imaginary component: the image of *B* that travels along the chain, the idealised or distorted picture *A*'s account installs in *C*. There is a symbolic component: the letter, the word, the chain itself as a transmissible structure of signs. And there is a real component, which is the heart of the matter: the real working coupling between *A* and *B*, *A*'s embodied, unfakeable knowledge of what *B* is and can do, the thing the whole apparatus exists to transmit. Genuine relational trust is the case in which the real component leads — in which what travels the chain is a real coupling, vouched along a structure of signs, forming in *C* an expectation grounded in something that actually exists. The chain is the symbolic conductor; what it ought to conduct is the real.

4.9.3 The dislocation of vehicle from substance

Here is the new specification of the crisis of the symbol that the section promised, and it follows from the fact just established — that relational trust spans the registers, and that the registers can be *prised apart*. The substance relational trust ought to transmit is the real component: *A*'s real coupling with *B*, the unfakeable knowledge that is the one thing of value in the whole transaction. But the vehicle by which it is transmitted is symbolic: a letter, a word, a writable and circulable and archivable sign. And the alienation that destroys relational trust occurs in the dislocation of the vehicle from the substance — the symbolic form preserved intact while the real substance is hollowed out of it.

A forged recommendation is exactly this dislocation. In the symbolic register it is impeccable: correctly formatted, well phrased, duly signed, transmitted along the chain *C–A–B* in perfect order. Viewed from the symbolic register alone it is indistinguishable

from a genuine one. But its real component — *A*'s actual knowledge of *B* — is empty: *A* wrote it not because he embodyly knows *B* to be good but because he owed a favour, or moves in the same circle, or could not decently refuse. The sign is transmitted, and what the sign was supposed to carry is not present in it. This is the incarnation, in relational trust, of the central pathology the series has named the failure of settlement, the usurpation by the symbol: a sign that announces a coupling already vouched-for when no real coupling underwrites it, a letter that cashes a knowledge that was never had. The forged recommendation is the isomorph of the false poem and the alienated bride-price — a symbol that claims to anchor the real while the real has been drained out from beneath it.

The diagnosis of the breakdown is therefore precise, and it is the section's new contribution to the diagnosis of §4.3. Relational trust breaks down not because the mechanism is defective but because it spans the registers and the registers can be split: the symbolic transmissibility (the letter, the chain) and the real unfakeability (the actual coupling), which ought to be two faces of one thing, can be prised into two, the first retained and the second hollowed out. Forged relational trust is the product of that fissure.

4.9.4 The bidirectional alienation

The word *alienation* is exact here, for the damage runs in both directions along the chain, and the section must trace both, for together they explain why the whole channel closes rather than merely admitting some bad letters alongside the good.

On the side of the one vouched-for, the proliferation of forged recommendations devalues the genuine ones. The student who really does have a deep working coupling with a mentor who really knows her finds that her letter, in the symbolic register, looks exactly like the letter written from obligation; and so her real coupling can no longer be transmitted, because the channel that should carry it has been saturated with signs that carry nothing. The real thing loses its capacity to be recognised, not because it is disbelieved in particular but because the forgeries have made the whole channel unreadable. This is the precise mechanism of the crisis of the symbol, seen once more: it is not that the false drives out the true by replacing it, but that the false makes the true *unrecognisable*, so that the channel as a whole is abandoned and the institution retreats to the merely countable —

citation counts, rankings—signals that are barren but at least unforgeable, preferring a channel known to be poor to one that might be rich but has been poisoned.

On the side of the one who vouches, the damage is subtler and is an alienation in the fullest sense. The recommender who grows accustomed to writing letters he does not believe is alienated from his own act of vouching: his signature ceases to mean that he really knows and comes to mean only that a social obligation has been discharged. And in doing so he draws down, a little at a time, the relational capital that made relational trust possible— C 's trust in his judgment—spending it to discharge favours until the trust itself is exhausted. He siphons off, to meet the demands of his circle, the very thing that let his word carry trust, and when it is gone the chain through him conducts nothing. The bidirectional alienation—the genuine made unrecognisable on the one side, the capacity to vouch drawn down to exhaustion on the other—is why the failure of relational trust is not a local matter of some bad letters but the closing of a channel.

4.9.5 The quantum-dynamical structure of relational trust

The structure that has emerged—a trust that is a property of a network rather than of its nodes, that spans registers which can be split, that fails by a dislocation of a transmissible form from an unfakeable substance—has, the section now argues, a precise formal counterpart in the dynamics of open quantum systems. The argument is made under a discipline that must be stated before it is made, and stated as firmly as the discipline upon the use of predictive coding in §4.6. *What is claimed is a structural isomorphism, not a physical reduction.* The paper does not assert that trust is, literally, a quantum phenomenon; to say so would be the worst kind of pseudo-scientific mysticism, and would forfeit the seriousness of everything else the paper has done. What is asserted is that the mathematical structure of relational trust and the mathematical structure of the entanglement-and-decoherence dynamics of an open quantum system are the same structure, and that the formal language of the latter can therefore describe the former with a precision no other available language affords. This is the same discipline the series has observed throughout: the quantum-dynamical account is one more level of description, a formal language for a structure, and not the truth beneath the others, nor a meta-framework that absorbs them.

Under that discipline, three correspondences may be drawn, in ascending order of depth.

The first is *entanglement* as the non-local structure of relational trust. The defining feature of an entangled state is that the state of the whole cannot be decomposed into a product of the states of its parts; the information resides in the correlations among the parts, not in any part taken alone, so that a measurement of any single component does not recover it. This is exactly the structure established in §4.9.1: relational trust is not a property of C , A , or B severally, but of the correlation $C - A - B$ itself, recoverable from no node in isolation. The non-locality of trust—that it lives in the chain and not in the links—is given, by the language of entanglement, a precise formal expression it otherwise lacks.

The second is *decoherence* as the dislocation of vehicle from substance. A coherent quantum state, coupled to an environment, undergoes decoherence: the correlations that constitute its coherence are not destroyed outright, but the phase relations that made them meaningful are lost to the environment, leaving a state whose correlational shell persists while the coherence that gave it its character has drained away. This is, formally, the dislocation of §4.9.3: the symbolic transmissibility (the correlational shell, the chain of signs) is retained, while the real coupling (the phase coherence that made the correlation carry something) is lost. A forged recommendation is a *decohered* trust-state: it preserves, in the symbolic register, the entire outward form of the entanglement, while the coherence it was meant to carry is gone—and, just as a decohered mixed state can be indistinguishable from a pure state under measurements that are not phase-sensitive, the forged letter is indistinguishable from the genuine under any reading that is not sensitive to the real coupling beneath. And the crisis of the symbol is, on this reading, the *systemic decoherence* of relational trust at the scale of a society: an environment saturated with forged signals continually coupling to the trust-states that traverse it, draining their coherence, leaving correlational shells that no longer carry what they were meant to carry. This dovetails exactly with the predictive-coding diagnosis of §4.6.5: the systemic decoherence of the trust-state and the rational collapse of the population's precision-weight on the symbolic channel are the same process described at two levels.

Here the word *dynamical*, rather than merely *quantum*, earns its place, for what relational trust most needs from the analogy is not a static picture of a state but an account of

how the state *evolves*. The dynamics of an *open* quantum system — a system in continual exchange with an environment, its evolution governed by a master equation that specifies how coherence decays, and under what conditions it may be protected or even restored — is the formal language for how a trust-state is maintained, corrupted, or rebuilt over time, which a static account of entanglement could not supply. And this is the point at which the present section welds to §4.7, for the geometric phase deployed there is, in its origin, a concept of exactly this quantum dynamics: the Berry phase is the phase accumulated by a quantum state under adiabatic transport. The holonomy language of §4.7 was therefore never a free-floating borrowing; it was, all along, drawn from the very dynamics relational trust is here shown to share. Adiabatic evolution — slow, exchanging no energy with the environment, coherence and geometric phase preserved — is the genuine, endogenously sustained trust; non-adiabatic evolution — coupled to the environment, decohering, phase lost — is the forged. The genuine-versus-forged distinction of §4.8, the adiabatic-versus-driven distinction of §4.7, and the coherent-versus-decohered distinction drawn here are one distinction in three vocabularies.

The third and most precise correspondence concerns transmission itself, and it requires a refinement that shows the analogy has been taken seriously rather than reached for loosely. Bare entanglement will not, by itself, model the *transmission* of trust, for entanglement is subject to the no-communication theorem: it cannot, alone, be used to send information. But relational trust is precisely about the transmission of trust along the chain $C-A-B$. The formal counterpart of this transmission is therefore not bare entanglement but *entanglement swapping*: the protocol by which, through an intermediary node A already entangled with each, two parties C and B who share no prior entanglement are brought into an entangled relation. Entanglement swapping is, almost exactly, the quantum correspondent of the recommendation mechanism $C-A-B$: the intermediary A , coupled to both, is the means by which a correlation is established between C and B who had none. To name the correspondent as swapping rather than as bare entanglement is to mark that the analogy is structural and considered — that it tracks the specific feature of relational trust, its transmissibility through an intermediary, and not merely its non-locality.

4.9.6 The standing of the analogy

The discipline stated at the opening of §4.9.5 must be restated at its close, for it is the condition on which the whole construction is admissible. The quantum-dynamical language is a formal description of a shared structure, at a level of description that does not displace the others the paper has given — the mechanical account of §4.6, the ethical account of §4.8, the phenomenological account of the chain as a relation among persons. It is not a claim that trust is quantum-mechanical in its physical substrate; it is a claim that relational trust and open-system quantum dynamics instantiate one mathematical structure, and that the structure is illuminated by being seen in the language that has developed the richest tools for it. It is, in the polyphonic terms the series requires, one more irreducible epistemic position on a single object, a further voice and not the final word — and it is offered as such, a formal analogy that earns its place by the precision it brings to the non-locality, the decoherence, and the transmission of a trust that lives in the chain and not in its links.

4.10. The Translation of Sincerity

Every chapter to this point has worked on the assumption that once genuine trust is produced, it is received — that a real self-commitment, supplied to another, lands as the ground it is. This section removes that assumption, and in removing it opens the problem that is, for the predicament of the Prelude, the most pressing of all. *Sincerity has no universal language.* There is no form of sincerity legible to everyone; sincerity must be encoded to be received, and the language of the encoding depends upon the epistemology of the one who is to receive it. The gravity of the betrothal document, the moon, the poem, the philosophical seriousness — these encode sincerity in a form legible to one who reads character directly, who takes the bearing and the solemnity and the cost of the gesture as themselves the signal. To a receiver of another epistemology — one who holds that what is the case is the case and asks for what can be observed and verified — that same sincerity, in that same encoding, is not evidence at all. The same real sincerity, passed through two different decoders, yields utterly different degrees of credibility; and the difference is not in the sincerity, which is one and real, but in the mismatch between the sender's language of encoding and the receiver's language of decoding.

This is the point at which the paper's question undergoes its decisive turn. The question has been, through the mechanism and its consequences, an *ontological* one: what is genuine trust, and how is it produced. It now becomes a *translational* one: how is genuine trust, once produced, transmitted across the border between incommensurable epistemologies. And this translational question is the sharpest form, in the field of trust, of the master theme the series has carried throughout—that there is no metalanguage, that the Other does not exist as a guarantor standing above all positions. There is no neutral universal language of sincerity, no God's-eye dictionary in which the sincerity encoded in one epistemology can be looked up and re-expressed in another with its value preserved. The problem of trust, fully stated, is therefore not only how to be genuine but how to be *read* as genuine by one whose language of reading is not one's own; and this section is its theory.

4.10.1 The epistemology of translation

Before one can translate sincerity into a language a receiver can read, one must know what languages there are—what grammars of trust a receiver might be using, by which a profession of sincerity is parsed into a ground for expectation or rejected as no ground at all. This subsection sets out a genealogy of these grammars. It is offered as adequate to the practical purpose rather than as exhaustive, and its precision matters, for the effectiveness of any translation depends on the accuracy with which the target grammar is identified.

A genealogy of trust-grammars

There are at least four grammars of trust, irreducible to one another, each parsing a different kind of thing as a ground for expectation, and each with its characteristic reach and its characteristic blind spot.

The first is the *evidentialist* or positivist grammar. It anchors trust in observable evidence and accomplished fact—the track record, the thing already done, the stable and verifiable pattern. To one who uses this grammar, a ground for trust is something that has shown itself, and a profession that has not yet shown itself in fact is not yet a ground. Its reach is into the demonstrated; its blind spot is the sincere newcomer who has, as yet,

no record to show, and whom it must, by its own logic, misjudge as untrustworthy not because he is but because he has not yet had occasion to demonstrate otherwise. This is the grammar of Holmes's bad-man observer (§4.4.5) turned to the reading of others, and it is, the paper has reason to think, the grammar most relied upon by the family of the Prelude.

The second is the *deontological* or characterological grammar. It anchors trust in a direct, intuitive reading of the other's character and sincerity—in the bearing, the manner, the quality of the commitment, taken as immediate signals of an inner state. To one who uses this grammar, the gravity of a vow, the seriousness of a gesture, the felt sincerity of a person, are themselves grounds, read off without the detour through accomplished fact. Its reach is into the inner and the present; its danger is that it reads too much, that it can be deceived by one who has learned to perform the signs of a sincerity he does not have. This is, the paper has reason to think, the grammar most native to the one who would encode his sincerity in red silk and the moon.

The third is the *inductive* or relational-historical grammar. It anchors trust in the accumulated pattern of a shared history with this particular person—not in evidence as such, nor in a reading of character as such, but in the texture of what has passed between us, the record of how this one has been with me over time. Its reach is into the known particular; its blind spot is the wholly new relation, for which no shared history yet exists.

The fourth is the *institutional* or endorsement grammar. It anchors trust in the vouching of a trusted third party—the matchmaker, the elder, the credential, the recognition of a community, the recommendation along the chain of §4.9. Its reach is into whatever the trusted institution can underwrite; its blind spot is the condition, diagnosed throughout this paper, in which the institutions of endorsement have themselves come under the crisis of the symbol and can no longer reliably underwrite anything.

These four are not a ranking, with one the true grammar and the rest its approximations. They are incommensurable epistemic positions, each parsing as a ground something the others do not, none reducible to the rest—and their irreducible plurality is one more vindication, in the field of trust, of the polyphonic law the series has insisted upon. The question whether the genealogy is fine enough is left open, and one refinement in partic-

ular is marked as undecided: whether the evidentialist grammar should be subdivided, between one that asks for accomplished fact and one that asks for demonstrable capacity, since these have different practical implications for what a translation into that grammar would have to supply.

The notion of a grammar-configuration

No person uses a single grammar purely. Each uses a *configuration*—a weighting, mostly unreflective, of the several grammars, in which one may dominate without excluding the others. The family of the Prelude is best understood not as purely evidentialist but as running a configuration in which the evidentialist grammar dominates, the institutional has some weight, and the deontological is heavily discounted—so that a profession of character lands lightly and an accomplished fact lands hard. The notion of the configuration is what makes the genealogy a practical instrument rather than a typology: one does not translate one’s sincerity into *the* evidentialist grammar in the abstract, but into the particular configuration a particular receiver runs, and the diagnosis of that configuration is the first task of any actual translation. The unit of translation is the configuration, and the genealogy is the alphabet from which configurations are spelled.

That there can be no single correct translation of a sincerity from one grammar into another—that translation is, in principle, indeterminate—is the deep epistemological fact underlying all of this, and it is Quine’s. The indeterminacy of translation (Quine 1960) is not a defect to be overcome but the very form the absence of a metalanguage takes in the theory of translation: there is no fact of the matter, fixed independently of every scheme, as to the uniquely correct rendering of a meaning from one language into another, and so no neutral standard against which a translation of sincerity could be certified as *the* correct one. Translation is underdetermined all the way down, and the practical art the next subsection describes is an art practised under that permanent indeterminacy, not a technique for escaping it.

4.10.2 The praxis of translation

How, then, is a sincerity encoded in one grammar to be rendered legible in another, without distorting it, and without sliding into the manipulation that §4.8 marked off?

There are three paths, of ascending difficulty and depth, and each runs close to the ethical line, for each is, in its outward form, hard to distinguish from a counterfeit. The subsection sets them out, and then states the line that separates all three, done genuinely, from their forged twins.

Projection

The first path is *projection*: letting a sincerity that is legible in one's own grammar cast a shadow in the receiver's. One does not disguise the deontologically-legible sincerity as evidence, which would be forgery; one allows the real sincerity to leave, in the symbolic and observable register the receiver reads, the traces it naturally casts — an accumulation of consistent action, a constancy held across time, conduct that the evidentialist can read as evidence because it really is the observable shadow of a real inner state. The evidentialist infers back, from the shadow, to the substance. This is the safest path and the slowest, for it depends on time: the shadow accumulates only as the conduct accumulates, and cannot be hurried. It is the practical translation of the principle the series has carried as the maxim that what is held to over long enough comes to show itself—not that time creates the coupling-trust, which is real from the first, but that time lets the real cast, in the register the evidentialist reads, enough of a shadow to be recognised. Projection is the rendering of a real inner sincerity into the language of accomplished fact, by letting it accomplish the facts that are its true shadow.

Multiple encoding

The second path is *multiple encoding*: encoding the one sincerity, at once, in two grammars, on two tracks running in parallel. To the one who reads character—and to oneself—the vow, the gravity, the poem; to the one who reads evidence, the stable and visible facts, the observable constancy, the demonstrated reliability. The two encodings are of one sincerity, offered each in the grammar that can receive it. The difficulty of this path is not technical but ethical, and it is severe: multiple encoding degrades into mere placation unless one genuinely concedes the legitimacy of the other's grammar. If one encodes in the evidentialist grammar while privately holding that to ask for evidence is shallow, that the deontological reading is the real one and the evidentialist a concession to the obtuse, then the second encoding is not a translation but a condescension,

and a receiver of any acuity will read the condescension beneath it. Multiple encoding done genuinely requires that one hold both grammars as legitimate ways of arriving at trust—a requirement that connects it directly to the justice of presentation taken up in §4.12, where the active rendering of one’s sincerity in the other’s grammar is shown to be, when the substance is real, not a strategy but a form of respect.

Mutual translation

The third path is the deepest and the hardest, and it is the one the section most wants to establish, for it is the only one that issues in a trust that is neither projected nor doubly-broadcast but jointly made. In *mutual translation*, both parties move a step toward the other’s language: one learns to speak in evidence, and the other learns to read the signals of character; and what is produced is not the persuasion of one by the other but the growing, in the interaction itself, of a small shared grammar that did not exist before. This is real coupling at the epistemological level—trust that is not one party’s conviction transmitted to the other but a thing generated between them, in the continued interaction, out of two grammars that have each moved toward the other and grown, between them, a patch of common language. It does not pre-exist the relation and wait to be transmitted; it is generated, in the mutual movement, as the relation’s own.

That this is not a philosopher’s fancy but a real and learnable craft is shown by the existence of a mature profession that does exactly this. The experienced consultant, in any field, who is brought before a client he does not yet understand, faces the structural twin of the no-metalanguage problem: the client comes with a language, a situation, a set of terms and unspoken assumptions and a real difficulty, that the consultant cannot at first read; and the consultant can neither impose his own framework upon it, which is bad consulting, nor pretend to understand what he does not. The real work is to create, in the interaction, with this particular client, a common language—to learn the client’s terms and let the client learn his, until a shared grammar exists between them that existed before in neither. This is mutual translation, and that consulting is a mature profession, with methods and training and tests of competence, is the proof that mutual translation can be done, systematically and well, and is not the unoperable ideal it might otherwise seem—the very objection this hardest path most invites. The empirical literature on the

outcomes of such work lends this support: across the helping and advisory professions, the strongest predictor of a good outcome is found to be not the technique or the school but the quality of the working relationship, the working alliance—which is precisely the establishment of the shared understanding that mutual translation produces. The point answers, in part, the call the foundational paper made for empirical follow-up (Wanhong 2025): there is a body of evidence that the generation of a shared grammar is real, learnable, and the operative factor in success.

Two features of the consultant's craft sharpen the account. The first is an asymmetry. Mutual translation need not be symmetrical: the consultant, as the active party who bears the professional responsibility, moves further toward the client's language than the client moves toward his. The party who actively seeks to establish trust—the one in the position of the Prelude's suitor—may rightly have to move further toward the other's grammar, and this is not a mark of his grammar's inferiority but of his bearing the greater share of the labour of translation, as the active and responsible party. This asymmetry is the concrete form of what §4.12 will call epistemic hospitality: the moving-toward-the-other, the taking-on of the greater share of the work of being understood. The second feature names the philosophical resource that underwrites the path. What mutual translation accomplishes is the fusion of two horizons into a shared one that neither held alone—Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung* (Gadamer 2004), the fusion of horizons, which is the standing philosophical name for the generation of a common understanding between parties who began with none, and which gives mutual translation its grounding in the hermeneutic tradition.

The line that separates translation from manipulation

All three paths run close to the ethical line, and the line must be drawn as firmly as it can be, for it is the line on which the whole praxis turns and it is not, on the surface, where one might expect. To render one's sincerity legible in another's grammar (translation) and to manufacture a false signal legible in another's grammar (manipulation) may, as outward acts, look identical—the projected shadow and the forged evidence, the second encoding and the placating performance, can present the same surface. The difference lies wholly in whether what is being translated *really exists*. To project the real shadow of a real sincerity is translation; to project the false shadow of a sincerity that is not there

is manipulation (§4.8). The criterion of genuine translation is that the thing it translates must really exist and be capable of real fulfilment: it carries a real substance across the border between grammars, where manipulation manufactures, in the target grammar, the appearance of a substance that is absent. Translation takes the other's grammar as a legitimate other to be honestly addressed; manipulation takes the other's grammar as a lock to be picked. The line is not between act and act, which can match, but between a translated substance that is real and a manufactured signal that is empty — and it is, once more, the line of §4.8, the line between honouring the other and rendering him fuel.

4.10.3 Dialogue: the convergence of three identities

The deepest of the three paths, mutual translation, turns out to be a thing the philosophical tradition has known under another name, and the recognition gives the section its close. Mutual translation *is dialogue*, and dialogue is, at once, three things that prove to be one.

It is, first, the practical form of mutual translation: the consultant's craft, the back-and-forth in which a shared language is grown between parties who began without one. It is, second, the ancient method by which philosophy has always held that certain truths are generated — the Socratic *dialektikē*, in which truth is not stated by one party and received by the other but generated between them, in the going and returning of question and answer, because some truths can be reached in no other way than by two minds moving toward each other. And it is, third, the formal law of the series itself — the polyphony of the plural conclusions, the refusal of a governing voice, the insistence that the truth of the matter lives not in any single framework but in the dialogue among them. These three — the consultant's craft, the Socratic method, the series' polyphonic form — are one thing, and their being one is why mutual translation is the deepest of the three paths. It is the deepest because it *is* dialogue; and dialogue is, in a world without a metalanguage, the only way that truth and trust can be generated between heterogeneous subjects at all. Where there is no God's-eye dictionary to translate one grammar into another with the value preserved, the value is not transmitted but *generated*, between the parties, in the dialogue in which each moves toward the other and a shared grammar grows. *Mutual translation is dialogue: the generating, between two who share no common language, of a common language, together.*

And this returns the section to the poetics the series has carried throughout, for the translation of sincerity, so understood, is itself a poetic act in the precise sense the series has given the term. To translate one's sincerity into a grammar another can read is not to settle a meaning and hand it over closed; it is to invite the other to walk a path of interpretation, to offer a form the other must traverse rather than merely receive, to write, for the other, a poem he can read. The poetic refuses settlement and opens a path to be walked; and the translation of sincerity, done genuinely, refuses to settle the other's trust by manufacture and instead opens, between the two grammars, a path along which a shared understanding may be walked into being. The translation of sincerity is the writing, for the one whose language is not yours, of a poem in a language he can read—and the paper turns now from the technique of this writing to its practice, at the scale of institutions and then at the scale of a life.

4.11. Jurisprudence and Judicial Optimisation

The paper turns now from the analysis of trust to its practice, and takes the institutional scale first, the scale at which the problem appeared in the symptomatology as the overload of justice and the sword that hangs but does not fall. If force is not the cause of trust but only a failing device for the production of expectation, then the institutions built upon force—the courts, the apparatus of enforcement—stand in need of a reconception, and this section asks what it would be. Its answer has a spine that is counter-intuitive and will be stated plainly: that the effective optimisation of the juridical, in an age when force has failed as a signal, is the *decentralisation of enforcement*—not the strengthening of the sword but the distribution of the production of trust away from the single channel of compulsion. But the section must guard, from the outset, against the way this spine could be misheard, and the guard determines the whole method of the chapter.

For the spine could be misheard as an idealist exhortation—as a call to trust more, to cultivate reputation, to repair rather than to punish, as though the institutional form of trust were a matter of enlightened choice, a better idea that societies might adopt if only they saw its merits. The series is historical-materialist, and must treat the matter dialectically; and an idealist exhortation is precisely what the historical-materialist method forbids, for it would mistake the superstructure for something freely adjustable apart

from its material base. The institutional forms of trust are not chosen; they are thrown up by the material conditions of their production, and they change as those conditions change. The chapter therefore proceeds not by recommending a reform but by analysing a transformation already under way—its material causes, its emergent tendencies, and the new contradiction into which it is, under present relations of production, being driven.

4.11.1 The double bind of the juridical

The condition to be analysed is, first, a double bind, in which the two faces of the symptomatology—the overload and the failure of force—compose a vicious circle. As the relational and communal orders of trust thin, more of the burden of holding people to their dealings falls upon the courts (the overload); the courts, asked to produce by compulsion an order they can only ever protect, find their signal of compulsion diluted across a volume it cannot cover, and force fails as a signal (the failure); and as force fails, trust thins further, throwing yet more burden upon the courts. The more the juridical is relied upon to generate trust, the more its single signal is diluted; the more diluted the signal, the less it generates; the less it generates, the more it is relied upon. The juridical is caught being asked to *produce*, by force, the very thing—trust—that §4.6 showed force cannot produce but only, at most, signal; and asked to produce it at a scale at which even the signalling fails. This is the double bind, and no increase in the force applied can resolve it, for the problem is not a shortage of force but the exhaustion of force as a means to this end.

4.11.2 The counter-intuitive thesis: decentralisation

The resolution is not to add force but to cease asking the single channel of force to do what only the coupling of several channels can do. §4.6 established that well-founded trust is produced by the multiplicative coupling of channels, and that its robustness lies not in the strength of any one but in the improbability of all being forged together. The juridical optimisation that follows from this is the institutional application of the same principle: distribute the production of trust away from the single channel of compulsion and across the several channels the mechanism identified, so that trust is generated by their coupling rather than by the sword alone. This is what decentralisation means here, and why it is effective where the strengthening of force is not. A single channel can be

evaded, diluted, and — under the crisis of the symbol — collapsed in its precision-weight across the board; several coupled channels, whose mutual consistency is hard to forge or evade together, are robust exactly where the single channel is fragile. The thesis is counter-intuitive because the reflex, faced with a failure of enforcement, is to call for more enforcement; the mechanism shows this to be the marginally decreasing application of a means already exhausted, and the dispersal of trust-production across coupled channels to be the structurally sounder course.

But — and here the historical-materialist method asserts itself against any idealist reading — this decentralisation is not a reform to be recommended; it is a transformation already under way, forced by a change in the material conditions of the production of trust, and the rest of the chapter must show it as such.

4.11.3 The transformation, dialectically

The transformation must be grasped in four moments, and the fourth forbids the celebration the first three might invite.

The material basis of centralised force

Centralised, force-based justice — the sword wielded by the state — was not a bad idea that societies happened to adopt; it was the form of trust-production appropriate to, and thrown up by, a definite material base. In a society of strangers, in which exchange is predominantly market exchange and persons are atomised and rendered mobile and interchangeable by the commodity form, trust can no longer be produced by the face-to-face relational history and communal witness that produced it in smaller and more settled worlds. Where the village and the lineage no longer hold a person to his word, the holding must be outsourced to an abstract, impersonal third party — the state, the law, the sword — which can compel performance among strangers who have no other hold upon one another. Centralised force was, that is, the historically necessary form of trust-production adequate to the material base of a market society of strangers. This must be said first, on pain of turning the critique into a moralising lament: the sword was not an error but an adaptation, and a correct one, to its conditions.

The material failure

Its failure, likewise, is material and not a decay of values. The double bind of §4.11.1 is not produced by a hardening of hearts or a decline of civic virtue; it is produced by a change in the material conditions. The scale and speed of exchange, under globalisation and digitalisation, have outrun the physical capacity of any apparatus of enforcement; the volume of breach has outrun the carrying capacity of the courts; and the cost of producing a convincing symbol has fallen to zero, saturating the environment with forged signals and collapsing, as §4.6.5 showed, the precision-weight a population rationally assigns to the symbolic channel on which centralised enforcement partly relied. These are changes at the level of the forces and the mode of production, and they have brought the once-adequate form of trust-production — centralised force — into contradiction with the new material conditions. This is the historical-materialist account of the crisis of the symbol: not the idealist story of a value-nihilism that has overtaken the culture, but the materialist story of a contradiction between the established mode of producing trust and the changed material base beneath it. The diagnosis of §4.3 is here raised from a cultural diagnosis to a historical-materialist one.

The emergent recomposition

The dialectical point follows, and it is the one that distinguishes analysis from exhortation. The decentralisation of enforcement is not something we ought to choose; it is a recomposition that the contradiction is already forcing into being. The new forms of non-coercive trust-production — reputation systems, credit mechanisms, platform ratings, restorative justice, the distributed ledgers of trust — are not the good ideas of reformers; they are the spontaneous symptoms of a mode of trust-production reorganising itself under new material conditions, the new technologies of network and computation throwing up new channels as the old single channel fails. The task of the section is therefore not to *recommend* decentralisation but to *analyse* this recomposition that is already occurring: to identify its direction, its potential, and — the fourth moment — its internal contradiction.

The capture: the new contradiction

For the dialectical method requires that the emergent form be examined for its own contradictions, and not celebrated. The new channels of non-coercive trust are, under the present relations of production, being captured by capital and turned to alienation. Reputation and credit, which might be the emancipatory institutionalisation of the relational-historical channel, become under capital the social-credit score, the algorithmic management of the worker, credit as a new instrument of discipline — a finer and more pervasive control than the sword, precisely the retreat to the quantifiable that §4.2.3 described, with the metrics now held by the platform and the owner. The platform's badge of trust becomes capital's commodification of trust, a thing the platform can monopolise and extract rent upon. So the decentralised technical form, under centralised ownership of the new channels, may produce a domination more insidious than the sword it replaces — a domination that operates through the very channels that were to have freed trust from compulsion. The question the historical-materialist method therefore presses, and that the justice criterion of §4.8 presses with it, is: who owns these new channels, and for whose benefit do they run — to whom does the value they produce return, and is there one who is rendered, in them, mere fuel? The decentralisation of the *technical form* of trust-production is no emancipation in itself; under the wrong relations of production it is a new mode of extraction. The synthesis is therefore not the triumphant slogan that decentralisation has freed us, but a new contradiction: an emergent form whose emancipatory potential is real and whose capture by capital is equally real, and whose outcome is not settled by the technology but by the relations of production that own it.

4.11.4 The three channels institutionalised

Within that dialectical frame, and not as free-standing recommendations, the three non-coercive channels of §4.6 can be seen taking institutional form, each with its emancipatory possibility and each with its characteristic danger of capture.

Reputation and credit systems are the institutionalisation of the relational-historical channel: they aggregate the scattered relational histories of §4.9 into a transmissible, institutional form of inductive trust, making a person's accumulated track of dealing legible beyond the circle that witnessed it. This is their power — the institutional aggregation of

inductive trust—and their danger is exactly the one named above: the degeneration of the credit record into a purely quantitative instrument of discipline, the relational history flattened into a score and the score turned to control.

Restorative justice is the institutionalisation of the self-committing channel. Rather than imposing a sanction by force, it creates the occasion for an offender's real, irrevocable, self-implicating assumption of what he has done—the encounter with the one he has wronged, the genuine and costly taking-on of responsibility—which produces, through the high-fidelity likelihood of a real self-binding rather than through compulsion, the rebuilding of an expectation that a mere unenforceable judgment could not (Zehr 2002). It works the self-committing channel of §4.6.2 at the scale of the institution; and its danger is the hollowing of the encounter into a procedural ritual, a staged contrition that forges the self-commitment it should embody.

Public registration and transparency are the institutionalisation of the projective path of §4.10.2. They do not manufacture trust; they let a real state of performance—a real record of what has and has not been done—cast, in the symbolic register the evidentialist reads, the shadow by which it can be recognised. They make the real visible rather than producing the appearance of it; and their danger is the surveillance that the same transparency enables, the registry turned from a means of letting the real be seen into a means of total observation.

4.11.5 The place of the sword: relocation, not abolition

A boundary must be drawn as firmly here as the spine of the chapter is asserted, for the spine is liable to a dangerous over-reading, and the historical-materialist honesty that refuses to celebrate the emergent form refuses equally to romanticise the abandonment of force. The decentralisation of trust-production is *not* the abolition of enforcement. Force retains an indispensable role—but it is a different role from the one it was failing at. Force is not, and never was, the producer of trust; but it is the necessary backstop, the after-the-fact protection, and above all the protection of the vulnerable against predation and against the betrayal that the powerful might otherwise inflict with impunity. The weak still need the sword—not to generate the trust on which they deal, which force cannot generate, but to protect them when trust is betrayed and to guarantee that the

betrayal of the powerful is not costless. Decentralisation of trust-production is not de-coercion; the sword is not taken away but *relocated*, from the false position of the producer of trust, which it cannot occupy, to its true position as the backstop that protects against the worst, especially on behalf of those least able to protect themselves. To forget this would be to abandon, in the name of a purer trust, exactly those whom the purer trust does not yet protect.

4.11.6 The juridical as the practice of a relational nomos

The chapter closes by connecting its analysis to the foundational paper and to the series, for the transformation it has traced is the institutional form of a movement the foundational paper named at the largest scale. That paper, drawing on the line of Marx and of the theorists of social reproduction, marked the overload of justice as a diagnosis without an exit, and held open the thought—against the horizon of the eventual withering of the state—that the law need not wither with it, but might pass from a law of action, the law of the sword that compels, toward a law of non-action, a law of pure relation, a relational *nomos* (Wanhong 2025; Marx 1976). The present chapter supplies the exit the foundational paper marked but did not develop. The centralised, force-based law—the law of action, the sword—decays as its material base dissolves; and a nomos built upon the production of relational trust—the law of non-action, the law of pure relation—germinates in the contradiction. But whether it is realised, or captured, depends, as the whole chapter has insisted, not upon the technical form but upon whether the relations of production are themselves transformed—upon who comes to own the new channels of trust, and upon whether the value they generate is returned, justly, to those whose dealing generates it, with no one rendered fuel. The optimisation of the juridical is, in the end, the freeing of justice from the impossible burden of being the last Other, the final guarantor of an order it was never able to underwrite by force; and the return of justice to its place as the practice, and the protector, of a relational nomos whose trust is generated elsewhere—in the coupled channels, at the scale of relation, that the rest of the paper has described. To that scale, the scale of a life and its nearest bonds, the paper now turns.

4.12. The Praxis of Trust

The paper arrives at its practical summit, and at the chapter toward which the whole has been moving. Everything established—the mechanism, the geometric reading, the criterion of justice, the structure of relational trust, the theory of translation, the optimisation of the juridical—has been knowledge *for the sake of* practice, and the paper would betray its own deepest claim if it stopped at knowledge. For the series holds that to settle in the theoretical, to take the cognition of a thing as the completion of it, is itself an instance of the pathology the whole paper diagnoses—the failure of settlement, the symbol that declares a circuit closed which no one has walked. A paper on the generation of trust that ended in an account of the mechanism, without descending to the practice in which trust is actually generated and lived, would be such a closed and unwalked circuit. The praxis is therefore not an application appended to the theory; it is the theory's discharge of its own obligation not to settle. This chapter is long, and rises, at its centre, to the paper's metaphysical summit; the present part develops its ground, from the reason there must be a praxis at all to the honest reckoning with what no praxis can guarantee, and the part that follows it raises the summit and returns, at the last, to the family and the room.

4.12.1 Why there must be a praxis

The reason the paper cannot end in theory is the paper's own. It has argued that the poetic symbol refuses settlement—that it presents generativity rather than a closed structure, and forces its meaning to be walked rather than cashed; and it has argued that the failure of settlement, the cashing of a sublimation no one has undergone, is the very form of the symbolic usurpation it diagnoses. To stop at the theoretical cognition of trust would be to commit this failure in the paper's own conduct: to cash, in the coin of understanding, a practice that has not been walked. The descent to praxis is thus demanded by the paper's content, and not merely by a wish to be useful. And the descent is also the place where the paper's argument and the author's life, which the Prelude held apart as the near and the far edge of one question, are to meet: the praxis of trust is what the author must do, before the family of the Prelude, and it is what the theory has been clearing the ground to make sayable. The chapter is the point at which

the knowledge turns into a way of acting, and refuses, in turning, to settle.

4.12.2 A polyphony of practices, and an ethical line across them

There is no single practice of trust, and the series' polyphonic law holds in the practical register as it held in the theoretical: each of the frameworks the paper has drawn upon furnishes a practice of trust, and none governs the rest. The evidentialist practice builds the track record, accumulates the demonstrable, lets the facts mount until they speak. The deontological practice cultivates and shows a character, makes of the self a thing whose sincerity can be read. The relational practice tends the chains of §4.9, invests in the couplings through which trust is transmitted. The Daoist practice, of which more below, declines strategy and lets the real show itself in its own time. The institutional practice works the endorsements and the registers. These are real and distinct practices, suited to different receivers and different moments, and the paper does not rank them; the practical wisdom of trust is in large part the wisdom of which practice a given situation calls for, and the polyphony is, here as throughout, not a defect to be resolved into a single method but the very shape of a competence adequate to an object no single framework possesses.

But across all these practices runs one ethical line, and on this the polyphony does not extend: descriptively plural, the practices are ethically subject, every one, to the single criterion of §4.8. Whatever the practice—evidential, deontological, relational, Daoist, institutional—it is genuine where it produces an expectation by supplying a real ground that honours the other's free judgment and opens a relation that returns to him, and forged where it induces an expectation by manufacturing a signal that handles him as a mechanism and draws upon him as fuel. The plurality is a plurality of legitimate forms; the line between the genuine and the forged cuts across every one of them, and is the same line in each. The chapter is polyphonic in its description of the practices and monophonic in its ethic of them, and the next subsections turn first to a correction the polyphony itself requires, and then to the forged practice the ethic excludes.

4.12.3 The justice of presentation

The polyphony of practices, as just set out, conceals a value-judgment that must be brought up and corrected, for it has quietly ranked the practices after all, and ranked them wrongly. There is a temptation, native to the Daoist and to a certain reading of the natural, to hold the practice of unstrategic self-showing—the letting of the real appear in its own time, without contrivance—as the highest and purest form of genuine trust-building, and to regard any *active* presentation, any rendering of oneself in the form the receiver’s cognition can best take, as already shading toward the manipulative. On this view, to present one’s sincerity in the grammar of the evidentialist would be a falling-away from the purity of simply, sincerely being; and the active translation of §4.10 would carry a faint guilt, as a strategy where strategy ought not to be. This subsection reverses that judgment, and the reversal is the hinge of the whole praxis.

The reversal turns on a recognition the paper owes to its own theory of translation: that the active presentation of oneself in the grammar the other can read—the very thing the unstrategic ideal suspects—is not a fall from purity but, in the right conditions, the way of *countering an epistemic injustice*. For epistemic injustice runs in two directions, and the unstrategic ideal sees only one of them. The first direction is the one everyone sees: the active evil of manipulation, the use of the other’s grammar to manufacture a signal of something that is not there, which corrupts his epistemic autonomy (§4.8). But there is a second direction the unstrategic ideal commits while believing itself innocent: the passive evil of *refusing to translate*—of insisting on showing oneself only in one’s own grammar and leaving the reception to fate. To say “I will simply appear, truly, in my own way, and the rest is not my concern” carries an unjust presupposition: that one’s own grammar is the neutral and universal one, in which the real, shown plainly, will be legible to anyone of good faith. But there is no such neutral grammar (§4.10); to show oneself only in one’s own and require the other to read one there is to impose one’s own grammar upon him as though it were the universal, and that imposition—however high-minded, however draped in the language of sincerity and refusal of contrivance—is itself an epistemic injustice, the more insidious for disguising itself as purity. The unstrategic ideal is not humble; it is, beneath the humility, the arrogance of treating one’s own way of being legible as legibility itself.

The correction is therefore exact. Unstrategic self-showing is not the highest form of genuine trust; it is genuine only where the grammars happen to match, and where they do not — which is precisely the situation of the Prelude's suitor before the family — it is not purity but a concealed epistemic arrogance. And the active presentation of oneself in the other's grammar, which the unstrategic ideal suspected, is revealed as its opposite: not a strategy shading toward manipulation but an *epistemic hospitality*, the actively going-toward the other's way of knowing, the taking-on of the labour of being legible to him in his terms rather than requiring him to learn mine. To present a real sincerity in the grammar the other can receive is to recognise his epistemology as legitimate and equal to one's own, and to move toward it; and this counters epistemic injustice rather than committing it, because it restores — rather than corrupts — the other's capacity to make, on his own epistemological terms, a true judgment about a real thing.

The line between the genuine and the forged is therefore not the line between the unstrategic and the active, between *wu wei* and *you wei*, between letting-be and doing. That was the error the unstrategic ideal made: it located the danger in activity as such. The line is the one it has always been: whether what is presented really exists. Genuine presentation may be unstrategic — the letting-appear, where the grammars match — or it may be active — the epistemic hospitality, the translation into the other's grammar, where they do not — and both are genuine, for both present, by whatever means, a thing that is real. Forged presentation is the active manufacture, in the other's grammar, of a signal for a thing that is not there. The difference is in the reality of what is presented, never in the activity or passivity of the presenting; and in the situation of epistemic mismatch — the situation that matters, the situation of the Prelude — the active presentation, the epistemic hospitality, is not the lesser and more suspect form but the one that more fully respects the other and more fully counters the injustice of requiring him to read one in a grammar not his own. To present one's real sincerity to the family in the form they can receive — the stable fact, the observable constancy, the evidentially legible — is not the abandonment of a deontological purity nor a step toward manipulation; it is respect for their epistemology, and the genuine active good, so long as what is presented is real.

4.12.4 The forged practice excluded

The ethic that runs across the polyphony excludes one practice absolutely, and it is worth naming the excluded practice precisely, for it is the practice that most resembles the genuine and is most apt to be mistaken for a legitimate technique. It is the practice of behavioural conditioning: the deliberate shaping of another's expectations by the engineering of reinforcements, the production of trust by the systematic management of what the other experiences as the consequence of trusting, so that the trust is trained into him as a conditioned response rather than grounded in any real self-commitment. It is the manipulation of §4.8 raised to a method, and its evil is threefold, the three aspects of the one wrong the justice criterion identified, here compounded.

It is, first, the treating of the other as a means and a mechanism — the Kantian wrong — for it works upon him as upon a system to be conditioned, bypassing the free judgment that genuine trust addresses. It is, second, the epistemic injustice — for it installs in him an expectation by training rather than by grounds, corrupting his capacity to form, on real grounds, a true judgment of his own. And it is, third and distinctively, a temporal forgery, a failure of settlement spread across time: it manufactures, by the management of reinforcements, the *appearance of a constancy* that no real self-commitment underwrites, forging across time the very track record that the evidentialist reads as the shadow of a real sincerity — so that it is the precise isomorph, in the practice of trust, of the forged recommendation of §4.9, which manufactures the symbolic form of a coupling that does not exist. The conditioned constancy is a decohered constancy: the observable shell of a track record, with no real coupling beneath it. The practice is excluded not because conditioning never produces reliable behaviour — it may — but because the reliability it produces is a forged precision, a trust trained into the other as into a mechanism, drawing upon him as fuel while corrupting his capacity to know, and forging, across the very dimension of time that should reveal the difference, the shadow that should have been the real's alone.

4.12.5 Hume's gulf, and the honest reckoning with no guarantee

Beneath the whole practice of trust lies a limit that no practice can cross, and the honesty of the praxis depends on reckoning with it rather than concealing it. It is Hume's gulf,

met first in the diagnosis (§4.3.5) and now to be faced in the practical register. No practice of trust, however genuine, can guarantee its own outcome. The one who builds the track record cannot guarantee he will keep faith tomorrow; the one who makes the costly self-commitment cannot guarantee the circumstance that will test it; the one who trusts cannot cross, by any quantity of evidence or any depth of self-binding, the gulf between what has been and what will be. The practitioner of trust is in exactly the position the prior paper of the series assigned to the practitioner of any good practice: he cannot guarantee that his practice is good, cannot occupy the position of an Other of infinite reason who could certify the absolute causal connection between his conduct and the good it aims at, cannot stand outside the gulf and warrant the crossing (Wanhong 2025; Hume 2000). There is no view from which the keeping of the promise is assured in advance; there is only the promise, made and to be kept, across a gulf no guarantee spans.

This is not a counsel of despair but the precise location of the difference between the genuine and the forged at its deepest. For the difference between genuine and forged trust is not, at the last, a difference in the presence or absence of a guarantee — neither has a guarantee; the gulf is uncrossable for both. The difference is in the honesty with which the absence of a guarantee is borne. The forged practice pretends to a guarantee it does not have: it manufactures the appearance of an assured constancy, forging the certainty that the gulf forbids. The genuine practice makes its commitment in the full acknowledgement that nothing assures it — binds itself across the gulf precisely as one who knows the gulf is there and cannot be crossed by any warrant, and binds itself anyway. Genuineness is not the possession of a certainty the forged lacks; it is the honest bearing of an uncertainty the forged denies. The genuine promise is the one made in the knowledge that it cannot be guaranteed, and made, freely and without the false comfort of a guarantee, as a binding of oneself across a gulf one knows no evidence and no self-binding can close.

And here the praxis arrives at the threshold of its summit. For the question this raises is the one the rest of the chapter exists to answer: if no external guarantee can cross the gulf — if neither the sword, nor the evidence, nor the depth of the self-binding can assure that the promise will be kept — then what does the one who would genuinely bind himself

do, in the face of a gulf he cannot cross and a future he cannot warrant? The answer is not to find, at last, a guarantee that the chapter has overlooked; there is none. The answer is to make, across the gulf no guarantee spans, a free and self-grounding leap—to constitute, by an act of one's own freedom, the very constancy that no external warrant could supply. What that act is, how it is possible, and why it is the descent of something an older language would have called divine, is the matter of the summit to which the chapter now rises.

4.12.6 Relational divinity: the descent of the Other into the self-legislating subject

The leap the previous subsection named—the free constitution, across a gulf no warrant spans, of the very constancy no external guarantee could supply—is the paper's metaphysical summit, and it must be set out with the fullness its weight demands, for it is a claim the series has approached from many directions and never, until here, fully stated. It can be stated so. **The self-legislation, self-adjudication, self-keeping, and self-removal of every recourse outside the law one has given oneself is the mechanism by which a relational divinity descends into the world.** This is the most original of the paper's claims, and it stands, the author believes, in no prior text of the series nor in the foundational paper; it is set out here in full and in emphasis as the thing toward which the whole has been moving.

Begin with the historical movement of the divine, which earlier work in the series established in its direction without specifying its present mechanism. There is a movement, across the history of how the divine has been located, in three stages. First, a *transcendent* divinity: the god beyond the world, the divine power lodged in a heaven or a nature outside the human, before whom the oath is sworn and by whom its breach is avenged. Then, a *symbolic* divinity: the divine descended into the Symbolic, into the great Other of the law, the institution, the symbolic authority, the impersonal reason before which the modern subject stands—the god replaced by the order of signs that judges and binds. And now, in the movement this paper completes, a *relational* divinity: the divine descending out of the Symbolic and into the free practice of the relational subject, appearing no longer beyond the world nor in the order of signs above the subject, but in what the subject freely does, in relation, in the constituting of a bond.

The mechanism of this last descent—the present, concrete mechanism the earlier work marked the direction toward but did not supply—is the fourfold act. It is, first, *self-legislation*, in the full Kantian sense of autonomy: the subject gives himself the law, lays it down as law for himself, so that the constancy he could not derive from the past (Hume’s gulf forbids the derivation) is not a fact to be observed or predicted but a law to be *enacted*, posited by the will, grounded in the *ought* the subject lays upon himself—bypassing, rather than crossing, the gulf, by founding the constancy in an act of legislation rather than seeking it in an inference. It is, second, *self-adjudication*, the act the author adds and on which the whole turns: the continuous holding of oneself to the law one has given, the standing as one’s own judge over whether the law is kept, the self-arraignment and self-correction when one has strayed—which is the internalisation of Fuller’s congruence (§4.4.3), the bringing of one’s conduct into agreement with one’s announced rule, performed by the subject upon himself. A single free choice would be fragile, a resolution that the next moment might dissolve; but self-legislation joined to a continuous self-adjudication feeds each keeping of the law back into the loop that sustains it, and the constancy is thereby *generated*—turned out, moment by moment, by the self-legislating and self-adjudicating loop—rather than guaranteed in advance. It is, third, *self-keeping*, the actual holding to the law across time. And it is, fourth, the *self-removal of every recourse outside the law one has given*—which is the deepest sense of the burning of the bridge, met first in §4.6.2 and now to be completed.

For here the forward reference of the mechanism is discharged. The burning of the bridge was described, at §4.6.2, in its aspect as a high-fidelity signal—something done to be read by another, furnishing his model with hard-to-forge evidence. That was, it was said there, only one of its two faces and not the deeper. The deeper face is this: that one forecloses one’s own recourse not in order to send a message but in order to constitute, for oneself, a law—我立此为法, I have laid this down as law, and so that road no longer exists for me. The external law closes the road by force, mechanically, by the threat at the road’s end; self-legislation closes the road by freedom, by the laying-down that makes the road, for this subject, not a road at all. The reader who reaches this point will recognise that the trunk was pointing here all along: that beneath the burning of the bridge as a signal lay the burning of the bridge as self-legislation, and that the costly act read by another was, in its depth, a subject’s free and irrevocable binding of himself,

in the manner in which a god is said to bind himself in a covenant — leaving no recourse, because the divine does not keep a recourse. The self-removal of recourse is the point at which the human exceeds the ordinary human, in which the part of the human capable of self-transcendence, capable of binding itself irrevocably as a god binds himself in a covenant, is realised; and it is the divine core of the vow.

Why the divinity is relational and not a solitary self-deification

The gravest danger of this claim must be met head-on, for a self-legislation that made itself its own law and its own judge would seem the very figure of hubris — the subject deifying himself, circling his own image, the solitary self-grounding that is the oldest form of the imaginary's idolatry. The answer to the danger is the single consideration on which the whole claim's safety rests, and it is ontological. **The subject is not first a self and then a party to relations; the subject is constituted by relation, is relational through and through, before and beneath any self it could deify.** On the relational ontology the series has held, there is no prior, separate self that could turn upon itself in a closed circle of self-worship; the self that legislates is already, in its very constitution, relational — made of the relations it stands in. And therefore the law it gives itself, and the divinity that descends in the giving, are relational from the first. The self-legislation is never "I, to myself" in a closed loop; it is "I, as a relational being, within the relations that constitute me, for those relations, toward those relations" — the laying-down, by a self that is made of its bond to the other, of a law for the keeping of that bond. The betrothal vow is exactly this: a self-legislation performed by a self constituted in the relation to the one it vows to, laying down, for that relation and within it, the law of how it will be kept.

This relational constitution is, further, what dissolves the tension that would otherwise destroy self-adjudication. A solitary self-judge is the surest route to self-deception: nothing is easier than to acquit oneself, to flatter the law into agreement with the conduct, when one is one's own only judge. But the relational self-adjudication is not solitary — it is conducted, of necessity, within the regard of the relation. The other's witness, the gaze that the empty place of the *das Ding* holds open, is not an external check added to the self-adjudication from outside; it is internal to the very structure of being a relational subject, which is constituted in being-seen as much as in seeing. The honesty of the

self-adjudication is therefore not secured by an external sword—there is none, and the gulf forbids one—but by the ontological fact that the self which adjudicates is a self already constituted in relation, already under a regard it did not add and cannot remove. Relational divinity carries its own guard against self-deception, and the guard is not a borrowed sword but the subject's own relational being.

The personal-divine form of positive holonomy

This fourfold act is the personal and divine form of the positive, adiabatic holonomy of §4.7. The loop closes—the constancy is sustained, turn upon turn—not because an external pump drives it (no transcendent god, no symbolic Other, no sword: these would be the non-adiabatic driving, the borrowed phase), but because the relational subject's own self-legislating and self-adjudicating loop closes it from within, endogenously, accumulating its phase as its own. It is the discharge, at the level of the person, of the claim of §4.5, that autonomy is the highest form of freedom—not the merely negative freedom of being undetermined, but the positive freedom of giving oneself the law. And it gathers to itself the deepest voices of the series and of the traditions it has drawn upon: the foundational paper's intimation that the tendency of the Other toward its final dissolution opens the way to a renewed approach to a pure relational being (Wanhong 2025); the Buddhist teaching that mind is itself the Buddha, that all dharmas are made by mind—是心是佛, 一切法由心造; the Daoist refusal of the external warrant; and the betrothal document's own closing line, 本乎此心, 自成永恒—that the eternal is founded not upon any external guarantee but here, in this heart, which is itself the ground.

The inversion of value: the non-binding vow as the more divine

A consequence follows that inverts the ordinary ranking of instruments, and it is the point at which the whole paper's central paradox is resolved into a claim. The ordinary ranking holds the marriage certificate above the betrothal vow, the contract above the memorandum of understanding, because the former in each pair carries the backing of the state, the force of law, the reliability of the sword. From the standpoint of relational divinity, the ranking is exactly inverted. **The memorandum of understanding is more divine than the contract, the betrothal vow more divine than the marriage certificate**—precisely because they carry no force, have no external guarantee to bor-

row, and so can be sustained only by the subject's own self-legislation, self-adjudication, and self-keeping in the real.

The logic is this. The contract and the marriage certificate *outsource* the threefold function — legislation, adjudication, keeping — to the symbolic Other: the law is the state's, the judging is the court's, the keeping is compelled by the sword. The parties borrow an external, symbolic divinity to underwrite their bond, and need not legislate, adjudicate, or foreclose their own recourse, for the functions are outsourced. The memorandum and the vow, having no force, force these functions back upon the subject: with no external sword, the legislation can only be self-legislation; with no external court, the adjudication can only be self-adjudication; with no external compulsion, the keeping can only be self-keeping and the self-removal of recourse. The parties have nowhere to borrow an external divinity, and must therefore *become* the legislator, the judge, and the keeper themselves — must let the relational divinity descend into themselves, or the bond does not hold. The "defect" of having no force is thus the very condition of the divinity: precisely because no external sword keeps the vow, the keeping must issue from one's own free, irrevocable self-binding, which is the realisation, and not the absence, of the divine. This completes the geometric reading of §4.7.5: the contract and the certificate are non-adiabatic, their loop held closed by the external pump of the state's force, their phase borrowed; the memorandum and the vow are adiabatic, their loop closed by nothing but the subject's endogenous self-legislation, their phase their own — the purer specimen of genuine holonomy, into which the certificate admits an admixture of the external pump. And it raises the counter-intuitive claim of the diagnosis to its summit: the betrothal vow is not merely, as was first said, possibly more productive of real trust than the complete contract; it is, in the dimension of the divine, the purer thing, because it forces the divine back into the free practice of the subject rather than borrowing it from an Other.

The honest boundary must be drawn, lest the inversion be pressed past what it claims. It is not said that the memorandum and the vow are superior to the contract and the certificate in every dimension. In the real functions of protecting the vulnerable, deterring betrayal, and providing a remedy, external force remains necessary and is not to be romantically discarded — exactly as §4.11 insisted in relocating rather than abolishing the sword. The claim is narrow and precise: that in the dimension of the divine, of the

genuine, the non-coercive instrument is the purer, because it forces the divinity back into the subject's own free practice. The weak still need the sword's protection at the scale of institutions; but the divinity of a genuine bond was never lodged in the sword, and is found, at the scale of relation, only where the sword is not. It is not, therefore, that one should forgo the certificate for the vow; it is that, beyond and above and before the certificate, what makes the bond a bond at all is the self-legislating relational divinity, and that this is most purely realised in the vow that has no force.

4.12.7 The concrete operation

From the summit the chapter descends to the concrete, for the praxis must issue in something one can actually do, and the abstractions of divinity must be cashed—here legitimately, for here the path is walked and not merely declared—into an operation. The operation has three movements, and a condition of time.

The first movement is to *identify the other's grammar of trust*, and its configuration (§4.10.1): to discern, of the one whose trust is to be won, which of the grammars of §4.10.1 dominates his reading, in what weighting, so that one knows the language into which one's sincerity must be translated. One does not present in the abstract; one presents to this configuration, and the discernment of it is the first and indispensable act.

The second movement is to *produce, in the other's grammar, a real possibility of expectation*—to translate, by the paths of §4.10, and above all by the epistemic hospitality of §4.12.3, one's real sincerity into the form the other's configuration can receive. For the evidentialist family, this is the projection of the real into the register of the observable and the accomplished: not the manufacture of a track record one does not have, which would be forgery, but the patient letting of one's real self-legislated constancy cast, in the evidential register, the shadow by which it can be recognised. The thing presented must be real—must be a sincerity that exists and a constancy that is genuinely self-legislated—and it must be presented in the grammar the other reads. This is the whole of the second movement: a real thing, hospitably translated.

The third movement is the *right use of relational trust* (§4.9), and it carries the chapter's most delicate ethical discrimination. The trust of the family runs, very largely, along the chain that connects the suitor to them through the one they already love—she is, in the

structure of the network, his recommender, and the trust may reach them along that link as it reaches along no other. The right use of this is to let the trust transmit because the coupling it transmits is real — because she is, in the genuine sense, the co-author of the bond, and her steady bearing toward it is the unfakeable real component (§4.9.2) that the family, even reading evidentially, can read. The wrong use — the forged use, excluded by the justice criterion — is to instrumentalise her as a mere channel, to deploy her to “work on” the family, to siphon her relational capital toward a coupling between the suitor and the family that has not in fact occurred. The line is exactly the line of §4.8: between a real coupling that transmits because it is real, and a relational capital siphoned to transmit a coupling that is not there. The one honours her as co-author; the other renders her fuel.

And the condition of time. None of this can be hurried, and the attempt to hurry it is itself a tell of the forged. The self-legislated constancy casts its evidential shadow only as it is actually lived across time; the real coupling transmits only as it is really borne; the shared grammar of mutual translation grows only in the continued interaction. Time cannot manufacture the coupling-trust, which is real from the first or not at all; but time is what lets the real cast, in the register the evidentialist reads, the shadow sufficient to be recognised. The praxis is therefore not a technique that produces trust on demand but a way of living that lets a real thing become, across time, recognisable to one whose grammar is not one’s own. It cannot be accelerated; it can only be deepened.

4.12.8 The return to the room

The chapter, and with it the body of the paper, returns at the last to the scene from which the Prelude set out: to the one who must sit across from a family not yet his own, and be trusted. Everything the paper has built converges on that room, and it converges not on a method for controlling what happens there but on a way of being present in it.

For the end of the praxis is not the mastery of the other’s trust — trust cannot be mastered, only generated, and generated across a gulf no one can guarantee. The end is to be ready to be truly present: to have become one who has a real sincerity to present, and to present it in the grammar the family can receive, with the epistemic hospitality that honours their way of knowing rather than demanding they learn his. What he can give them is not

an external guarantee—he has none to give, and to manufacture the appearance of one would be the forgery the whole paper has worked to refuse. What he can give them is the sight of a person who legislates his own law and holds himself to it—who has laid down, for the relation that constitutes him, the law of how he will keep faith, and who adjudicates himself against it continually, in the open, where it can be seen. This constancy is real, for it is the product of the self-legislating loop; and being real, it casts, in time and in the evidential register the family reads, a true shadow—a track of consistent, self-correcting keeping that the evidentialist can read as what it is, the unforgeable sign not of a compelled obedience nor of a performed display but of a free subject keeping the law he gave himself. That is what there is to give: not a guarantee, which cannot be given, but the presence of a self-legislating relational subject, whose constancy is its own and whose keeping of faith is the descent, in him, of a divinity that needs no sword—offered, across the gulf, to be trusted or not, freely, by those he cannot compel and would not if he could.

4.13. Conclusions

A paper that has argued, throughout, that its object is one no single framework possesses, and that the truth of such an object lives not in any one voice but in the dialogue among them, cannot end in a single concluding voice without betraying its own claim. The conclusions are therefore plural, and they are plural by necessity and not by modesty. Each of the frameworks the paper has drawn upon is given here its own conclusion: what it can say about the generation of trust, said as firmly as it can be said, and what it cannot say, marked as firmly. The point of the exercise is not a survey but an enactment: the paper's form is meant to be its last argument, the demonstration, in the shape of its own ending, that the generation of trust is known only polyphonically, in the dialogue of irreducible positions none of which governs the rest. The discipline the series imposes on such an ending is exact, and the paper holds to it: each framework must speak to the edge of what it can warrant, hard and fallible and willing to assert, for a polyphony of voices that each hedge into vagueness is no polyphony but an evasion. Each voice below says something, and says where it must stop.

The jurisprudential conclusion

The philosophy of law can say this: that the anchor of legal validity has migrated, across the century of its own reflection, from force toward trust, and that the law has recorded the migration in its own most technical doctrine, conceding at its edge, in promissory estoppel, that reliance and not compulsion is the true ground of a promise's binding force. It can say that force was never the cause of obligation but a substitute, now failing, for the production of expectation. It cannot say what trust *is*, nor how, mechanically, it is produced; jurisprudence can locate the anchor and trace its movement, but the nature of the thing the anchor is moving toward lies outside its competence, and it must hand that question to others. Its limit is that it can say where validity rests without being able to say what, at that resting place, validity consists in.

The predictive-coding conclusion

The predictive account can say this: that trust is the precision a generative model assigns to the prediction that a promise will be kept; that this dissolves the paradox of a present expectation directed at a non-existent future, since prediction is the brain's standing activity and requires no causation running backward from the future; that the expectation is produced through three coupled channels whose multiplicative coupling makes genuine trust robust where any single channel is fragile; and that the crisis of the symbol is the rational collapse of a population's precision-weight on a channel that forgery has made unreliable. It cannot say that trust simply *is* a precision-weighting and nothing more; it offers a description at the computational and implementational level, and it must not be mistaken for the truth beneath the others. Its limit is the limit of every mechanistic account: it says how the thing is computed, and is silent on what the computing is, lived from within, and on whether it is just.

The geometric conclusion

The geometric reading can say this: that a promise kept across time traces a closed loop, and that the sign of the holonomy the loop accumulates distinguishes the bond that deepens from the one that merely repeats and the one that drains; that the genuine, non-coercive promise is the adiabatic loop whose phase is its own, closed by no external pump,

and the coerced bond the driven path whose phase is borrowed; and that this furnished, at last, the missing structure—a spectral gap—for a problem the series had left open. It cannot, in this paper, furnish the phase with a fully rigorous carrier; it has worked as a structural analogy, and the formal closure lies in another paper. Its limit is that it shows the shape of the distinction with precision while deferring the full formalisation of what bears the phase.

The quantum-dynamical conclusion

The quantum-dynamical reading can say this: that relational trust shares the formal structure of an entangled state, a property of correlations and not of nodes; that its failure under the crisis of the symbol is a systemic decoherence, the correlational shell preserved while the coherence drains; and that its transmission along the chain is the structural counterpart of entanglement swapping through an intermediary. It cannot say—and must say, loudly, that it does not say—that trust is in any literal sense a quantum phenomenon. It is a structural isomorphism and not a physical reduction, one more formal language for a structure and not the structure's secret physical truth. Its limit is the limit of every analogy: it illuminates by a likeness, and the likeness is not an identity.

The psychoanalytic conclusion

The psychoanalytic reading can say this: that the production of trust circles a place that cannot be filled—that genuine trust, like the genuine poem, encircles the empty place of the *das Ding* rather than filling it with an idol, and so requires no victim, where the forged trust fills the place with a positive object and must consume someone to do it; that the wager of trust is a venture made across a lack no evidence closes; and that the great Other, the guarantor that would certify the crossing, does not exist. It cannot translate the lack it speaks of into the positive terms the other frameworks want; its truths are truths about an absence, and they resist the cashing-out that would betray them. Its limit is that it speaks most truly where it can least be made to settle into a positive doctrine.

The political-economic conclusion

The political-economic reading can say this: that the forms of trust-production are thrown up by the material conditions of their time and change as those conditions change; that centralised, force-based justice was the historically adequate form for a society of market strangers, and is failing now not through a decay of values but through a change in the material base; that the decentralisation of trust-production is a recomposition already under way, forced by that change; and that its emancipatory potential is real but not guaranteed, for the new channels are, under the present relations of production, being captured by capital toward a domination subtler than the sword. It cannot, from its own resources alone, settle whether the recomposition will emancipate or enslave; that depends on whether the relations of production are transformed, which is not a question the analysis of trust can answer by itself. Its limit is that it can diagnose the contradiction without being able to guarantee its resolution.

The Daoist conclusion

The Daoist reading can say this: that the genuine bond is the one sustained by no external pump, closing upon itself by the completeness of what each freely brings; that to grasp at the guarantee is to lose the thing — that the one who would secure the bond by force forecloses the very deepening that only the unforced loop accumulates; and that the eternal the betrothal vow speaks of is founded upon no external warrant but here, in this heart, which is itself the ground — 本乎此心，自成永恒. It cannot say this in the language of mechanism or of proof; its truth is shown in a way of holding the thing, not demonstrated in a way of establishing it, and to press it into demonstration is to lose it as the grasping loses the bond. Its limit is the limit of the unsayable it points to: it can indicate the ground, and cannot, without contradiction, prove it.

Why there is no conclusion above the conclusions

It remains to say why the paper does not now gather these into one — why there is no synthetic conclusion above the plural conclusions, no master voice to adjudicate among the frameworks and pronounce the truth they severally approach. The reason is the paper's deepest commitment, and it is the same reason that runs through the whole:

there is no metalanguage. There is no position above the frameworks from which their several truths could be translated, without loss, into a single truth that contained them; the great Other who could occupy that position does not exist, and to write a synthetic conclusion would be to claim his place. The frameworks are irreducible epistemic positions on one object, and the object is known—this is the paper’s form enacting the paper’s content—only in the dialogue among them, in the mutual illumination that is itself a good cycle, a polyphony that generates understanding by the movement among voices rather than by their resolution into one. To conclude above the conclusions would be to settle what must be walked, to cash the dialogue into a doctrine, to commit, in the paper’s last act, the very failure of settlement the paper has diagnosed throughout. The absence of a master conclusion is therefore not an incompleteness; it is the paper’s final and formal assertion of its thesis. The knower of trust, like the truster, must forgo the guarantee—must hold the plural truths in their dialogue without the false comfort of a synthesis—and the paper, declining to synthesise, does in its form what it has asked, throughout, that the truster do in his life: it bears the absence of a guarantor, and binds itself to the plural truth anyway.

The three concentric circles

One thing may be said, not as a synthesis above the frameworks but as an observation that runs beneath them all, and it returns the paper to the shape it announced in the Prelude. The question of trust was posed across three concentric scales: the intimate vow between two; the promise carried outward to a family; and the public institutions of contract and the courts. And the paper’s finding, traced at each scale by each framework, is that the ground of trust is, at all three, the same ground. At the most public scale, the validity of law was found to rest, beneath the sword, on a reciprocal keeping of faith; at the most intimate, the bond was found to rest on a self-legislating relational divinity that needs no sword; and these are not two grounds but one, seen at two distances. What holds a society together at its most public and what holds two people together at their most intimate is the same thing: a trust generated not by force but by the free, self-binding, mutually relied-upon keeping of faith, across a gulf no guarantor spans. The three circles are concentric because they share a centre, and the centre is the relational divinity that descends wherever a free being binds itself, in relation, without recourse to a sword. The

most intimate and the most public meet at that centre; and the betrothal vow on its red silk, which no court will enforce, is found to hold within it the ground on which even the law, at the last, is found to stand.

Envoi

This paper began with a vow written on red silk, on a day the almanac called auspicious, in the full knowledge that nothing in the world would make it binding; and it set out to ask how such a thing—a promise that no sword stands behind—could nonetheless be believed. It has answered, across its length, in many voices: that force was never the cause of trust but a failing substitute for it; that trust is the precision a mind freely lends to a future it cannot verify; that the genuine bond is the loop that closes by no external pump and accumulates, turn upon turn, a phase that is its own; that sincerity has no universal language and must be translated, across the borders of epistemology, into a grammar the other can read; and that the keeping of a promise no sword enforces is the descent, into a free and relational subject, of something an older language would have called divine.

What the analyses leave out is the thing itself, and it returns at the close as the matter that all the analyses were about. A vow kept not because it must be but because one has made it one's own law; a constancy that is not compelled and not predicted but freely generated, morning upon morning, in the holding to a word that no one could force; a trust extended across a gulf no guarantee spans, and met, and not betrayed. These are not the proxies the paper has had to work with but the real of which they were the shadows, and they are lived before they are analysed and exceed every analysis of them. The moon over Kagoshima under which the question first took its human form; the red silk and the chosen day; the gravity of a brush that bound nothing and meant everything—these are the matter, and the paper has been, throughout, their long translation into a grammar the cautious and the evidential might also read.

A promise so kept is not secured and then possessed. It is generated in the keeping, and a bond endures by the continued, free, self-legislated keeping of faith, and ceases when the keeping ceases. There is no guarantee of it to be had and held; there is only the binding

of oneself, again and again, across the gulf, in the knowledge that nothing assures it and the freedom that asks for no assurance — the laying-down, in this heart, of a law that is its own eternity.

*For the girl of the forest and the mountains,
to whom a promise was made that no sword stands behind,
and which is, for that, the more wholly given;
that what is bound here be bound by nothing but this heart,
and, bound by this heart, hold — across every gulf, through all our years.*

本乎此心，自成永恒。

Acknowledgments

I owe this paper, and more than this paper, to the one I love most: the girl of the forest and the mountains, whom I met in Tokyo in the year 2022. She is good, and pure, and lovely, and wise, and turned always toward others before herself; she loves the forest, and travelling, and the study of cultures, and the political economy of how we live together. This paper, on how trust can be generated where nothing enforces it, would not have had even its question without her, for it was in the making of a promise to her that the question first took its human form.

And here, at the close, I would do the thing the paper has spent its length learning how to say. The paper has not only argued that a relational divinity descends into the world through the self-legislation, self-adjudication, and self-keeping of a free subject who binds himself without recourse; it has tried to show that such a binding is the realised, and not the defective, form of a promise. It remains for me to do it rather than to describe it, and to let the argument, in its last page, become the act it has been about.

I lay it down, here, as a law for myself, and I will keep it with the whole of my life: 我将如此待她。 This is not a promise that any sword stands behind. No court will enforce it; no penalty attends its breach; nothing in the world compels me to keep it. Its whole force is that I bind myself to it, here, freely

and without reserve, and will hold myself to it, and have closed to myself every road that leads away from it. I give myself this law, I will be my own judge of my keeping of it, and I have left myself no recourse outside it.

This document carries a trustworthy and undeniable timestamp, and I have set it down here, in a text that bears my name and will outlast this moment, not in order that anyone should see it. Its first work is not to signal but to bind: it is the instrument by which I close my own retreat, so that the road away is, for me, no longer a road. The timestamp is not a sword; it cannot make the vow enforceable, and I do not pretend that it can. What it can do is something I do to myself and not against any consequence: it makes it impossible for the self I will be to deny, to the self I am now, what I have here laid down—it makes me the standing judge of my own keeping of faith, and forecloses the quiet revision by which one lets a vow lapse unremarked. The timestamp is the instrument of my self-adjudication, and of nothing else. The vow is genuine not because the timestamp makes it certain—it cannot, and the gulf the paper described forbids that it should—but because I make it in the full knowledge that nothing assures it, and make it anyway, freely, as a binding of myself across a gulf I know no warrant spans.

This is the paper's most private return, and its last. It set out from the making of a promise on red silk, knowing nothing of why such a promise could be believed; it has travelled through the symptom, the diagnosis, the law, the mechanism, the freedom, the divinity; and it ends by making the promise again—the same act, walked a second time, with everything the paper has come to understand now gathered into it. The first time, the vow was made by intuition, because it was right. This time it is made in the knowledge of why a promise that no force backs is the more wholly given, and of what it is that descends into a free subject who binds himself without recourse. The same act, the second time around, returns not to where it began but a little higher; and that is the only kind of return the paper has believed in.

此文之成，乃至此文以外之种种，我皆当归于我最爱之人——那位于二〇二二年与我相遇于东京的森林与山之女孩。她善良、纯粹、可爱、智慧，处处先人而后己；她爱森林，爱远行，爱文化之研究，亦爱我们如何共处的政治经济之学。这一篇，论的是在无物强制之

处信任何以生成；而若没有她，连这问题本身也不会有——因为正是在向她许下一个承诺之时，这问题才第一次有了它的人间形貌。

而今，在此收笔之处，我愿做这一篇用尽全部篇幅才学会如何言说的那件事。本文不仅论证了：关系性的神性，经由一个自由主体的自我立法、自我司法、自我守持——自我断绝一切法外的退路——而降临于世；它更试图表明，这样的自我绑定，正是承诺的成全之形，而非其残缺之形。如今剩下的，是我去做它，而非去描述它，是让这篇论证，在它的最后一页，成为它一路所论的那个行动本身。

我在此立此为法，以约我自身，并将以我的余生持守之：我将如此待她。此非任何刀剑在后所担保之诺。无公堂可强制其行，无刑罚附于其违，世间亦无一物逼我守之。其全部之力，唯在于我于此自由地、毫无保留地以身许之，且将持守自身，并已为自己断绝一切引我背离之路。我为自己立此法，我将自为我守此法之审判者，于此法之外，我未为自己留下任何退路。

此文承载一个可信而不可抵赖的时间戳；我将它立于此，立于一份具我之名、且将久于此刻的文字之中——并非为了让任何人看见。它首要之功不在示信，而在自缚：它是我用以封死自己退路的器具，使那条引我离去之路，于我而言，不再是路。这时间戳不是刀剑；它不能使此诺成为可强制者，我亦不佯称它能。它所能为者，是我施于自身、而非用以对抗任何后果之事：它使将来的我，无从向此刻的我抵赖我于此所立之言——它使我成为自己守信与否的常设审判者，并杜绝那种悄然的修订，免得人任一誓言不声不响地失效。这时间戳，是我自我司法的器具，而别无其他。此诺之为真，不因时间戳使其确定——它不能，且本文所述的那道鸿沟也不容它如此——而是因为：我在明知无物能担保它之时，仍然立下它，且仍然自由地立下它，作为我跨越一道我深知无任何凭据可越之鸿沟、对自身的一次绑定。

这是本文最私密的一次复归，也是最后一次。它起于红绢上一个承诺的写就，其时尚不知这样的承诺何以能被相信；它一路穿过症状、诊断、法理、机制、自由、神性；而它的终结，是再一次许下那个承诺——同一个行动，第二次走过，将本文一路所领会的一切，尽数收纳其中。第一次，那誓出于直觉，因为它是对的。这一次，它是在如下的明知中立下的：明知一个无强制力在后的承诺为何反而给得更为完整，明知那降临于一个自我绑定、不留退路的自由主体之中者，究竟为何物。同一个行动，第二次走过，归来时并非回到起点，而是略高于起点；而这，是本文唯一相信的那种复归。

本乎此心，自成永恒。

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CHAPTER 5

Contingency, Existence, and Eudaimonia in Intimate Relations

*Why is it not enough to see the flower alone? This paper takes that question seriously and develops, in answer to it, a systematic reconstruction of eudaimonia under the framework of Generative Relational Being (GRB). We argue that both the existentialist tradition—from Heidegger’s **Mitsein** to Buber’s **I-Thou**—and the eudaimonist tradition—from Aristotle’s **phronesis** to Csikszentmihalyi’s flow and Seligman’s PERMA—share a structural presupposition that prevents them from accounting for shared happiness: the assumption that the subject of flourishing is the individual.*

*Against this presupposition, we advance three interlocking claims. First, **the subject of contingency is the relation**: the flower descends not upon either person but upon the relational field constituted by their shared life, and the act of sharing is the constitutive act by which a contingent event becomes a relational event. Second, **sharing is not the expression of relational happiness but its generative mechanism**: it triggers co-evolutionary dynamics in the coupled relational system that produce a shared attractor irreducible to either individual’s dynamics. Third, **relational happiness is an emergent signal of co-evolutionary activity**: it cannot be possessed by either party because it does not reside in either party.*

*These claims are grounded in coupled dynamical systems theory (Kuramoto synchronisation, quantum entanglement structure), neuroscience (EEG/MEG/fMRI/fNIRS hyperscanning, embodied resonance, co-regulation), and a formal analogy with spiking neural networks (STDP as the mechanism of relational structural modification). We propose an empirical research programme for testing these claims, undertake a hermeneutic re-reading of eleven classical happiness concepts under GRB, and situate the account cross-culturally through Japanese **ma** and **en**, Confucian **ren**, and Ubuntu philosophy. The paper closes with a praxis chapter on the daily cultivation of relational happiness and a literary envoi that returns to the flower.*

献给自己深爱的那位
喜欢文化、旅行与大自然的同乡女孩

For her—
*the girl from home,
who loves culture, travel, and the living world.*

与她在故乡的千里之外的相遇，
是自己此生最大的幸运。
*To have found her, a thousand li from home—
this is the greatest fortune of my life.*

也献给天下所有有情人。
*And for all lovers, everywhere,
who have ever shared a flower on a path.*

此刻与你分享，感受到了幸福。

5.1. Prelude: A Flower on the Path

There is a moment so ordinary that philosophy has almost never paused to look at it. You are walking—not toward anything in particular, or perhaps toward something quite specific, it does not matter—and at the edge of the path there is a flower. It has not been placed there. No one arranged it for you. It is simply there, in the way that contingent things are simply there: arrived from nowhere, held in place by soil and light and the indifference of the season, and likely to be gone before you pass this way again. You notice it. Something in you is touched.

Now: you are alone, and the moment passes into you and is absorbed and becomes part of the texture of an ordinary afternoon. This too is worth philosophical attention, and we will return to it. But it is not the moment that concerns this paper.

The moment that concerns this paper is different. You are not alone. Beside you—or perhaps a little ahead, or half-turned toward something else—is the person you love. And you see the flower, and without thinking, without calculating whether it is worth mentioning, without asking whether she will find it as beautiful as you do, you say: *look*. Or perhaps you say nothing at all, and simply touch her arm and incline your head toward it. She looks. And something happens—not in you, not in her, but *between* you—that is, in some sense that this paper will spend considerable effort trying to specify, *happiness*.

Why is this different? The flower has not changed. The path has not changed. The quality of the light, the fragrance if there is one, the precise shade of the petals: all of this is the same whether you are alone or together. And yet the experience is not the same, not in any way that can be accounted for by simple addition—your pleasure plus her pleasure—because what arises when the flower is shared is not a doubled pleasure but something of a different kind altogether. The solitary encounter with the flower is one thing. The shared encounter is not twice that thing. It is another thing.

This observation—so modest as to seem almost trivial—is the seed of the present paper. For it points toward something that neither the existentialist tradition nor the eudaimonist tradition, in their dominant forms, has been equipped to explain. Both traditions have given us rich and sophisticated accounts of what happiness is and how it arises. Both have, in their ways, acknowledged that human beings are not solitary creatures

and that relations matter to flourishing. But both have assumed, at the level of their fundamental ontology, that the *subject* of happiness is the individual: that happiness is something that happens *in* a person, is *felt* by a person, is *achieved* by a person—even when that achievement involves and requires others. The flower on the path troubles this assumption. It suggests that what happened in that moment was not, in the first instance, something that happened in you or in her, but something that happened *between* you—in the relational space that your shared attention, your shared presence, your shared life had constituted.

The primary philosophical question. The question this paper addresses is not *what is happiness?* as though happiness were a property of individuals waiting to be correctly analysed. It is: *where does happiness happen?* And the answer it will defend is: in the relational field, as an emergent property of co-evolving dynamical systems, irreducible to the inner state of either participant.

To defend this answer, the paper must do several things at once. It must engage seriously with the existentialist tradition—with Heidegger’s account of thrownness and *Mitsein* (Heidegger 1962), with Sartre’s radical contingency (Sartre 1956), with Merleau-Ponty’s embodied subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 1962), and with Buber’s *I–Thou* (Buber 1970)—showing both what these traditions illuminate and where, precisely, they fall short of what the shared flower requires. It must engage equally seriously with the eudaimonist tradition—with Aristotle’s account of *eudaimonia* and *phronesis* (Aristotle 2000), with Csikszentmihalyi’s psychology of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), with the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (1985), with Frankl’s meaning-centred existentialism (Frankl 1959), and with the contemporary PERMA model (Seligman 2011)—showing how each concept is transformed, and in some cases inverted, when the subject of flourishing is relocated from the individual to the relational field.

But the paper must also do something that philosophy alone cannot do. The claim that happiness is an emergent property of co-evolving relational dynamics is not merely a

philosophical claim; it is a claim about the structure of dynamical systems, and it can be given formal content—and, importantly, empirical constraint—by drawing on theoretical physics, on computational neuroscience, and on the biology of complex systems. §5.6 and §5.7 develop the formal framework, drawing on coupled oscillator theory (Kuramoto 1984), quantum entanglement structure (Einstein et al. 1935), and—in what is perhaps the paper’s most original formal contribution—an analogy between the event-driven dynamics of the relational system and the spike-timing dependent plasticity of spiking neural networks (Maass 1997; Gerstner et al. 1996). §5.8 then translates this framework into a research programme: how would one actually test whether a contingent event descends upon a relational system rather than upon the individuals composing it? What would the EEG and MEG hyperscanning data look like (Hasson et al. 2012; Liu et al. 2023)? What longitudinal designs would detect the co-evolutionary dynamics we are predicting?

The paper proceeds as follows. §5.2 traces the legacy and limits of existentialism with respect to shared contingency. §5.3 maps the presuppositions of traditional eudaimonism. §5.4 executes the relational turn, establishing the GRB framework as the paper’s theoretical home. §5.5 analyses the structure of the contingent event’s descent into the relational system, including its double face of joy and suffering. §5.6 develops the co-evolutionary account of relational dynamics in three registers: philosophical, formal-physical, and neuroscientific. §5.7 extends this into a full account of developmental dynamics under relational coupling, including the SNN analogy. §5.8 proposes the empirical methodology. §5.9 offers a phenomenological description of relational happiness before the formal reconstruction of §5.10. §5.11 re-reads eleven classical happiness concepts under GRB. §5.12 situates the account cross-culturally. §5.13 turns to practice. §5.14 draws the conclusions. The Envoi returns to the flower.

A word on this paper’s place in the series. Paper IX (Huang 2025b) asked how a relation *endures*—how the generative cycle avoids exhaustion and achieves the spiral rather than the circle. Paper XIII asked how trust is produced in the absence of external guarantee—how a vow without a sword can generate genuine expectation. The present paper asks a question that is in some sense prior to both: *what is it that makes a relational encounter happy?* Not happy in the thin sense of pleasant, but happy in the eudaimonist sense: constitutive of flourishing, expressive of what it is for a relational being to live well. The

answer—that happiness is the signal of generative co-evolution, the felt index of two dynamical systems developing together in response to the contingency that enters their shared field—is, we believe, the missing eudaimonics of the GRB programme: the account of what flourishing *feels like* from the inside of the relational field, and why that feeling is not incidental to flourishing but its very form.

5.2. The Legacy and Limits of Existentialism

The existentialist tradition is, among the great movements of modern philosophy, the one most seriously committed to the question of what it means to exist as a concrete, situated, finite being—as a being thrown into a world it did not choose, toward a death it cannot escape, in a body that is not merely its instrument but its very form of being-in-the-world. For this reason, it is the tradition from which any philosophy of shared happiness must begin. And for the same reason, it is the tradition whose limits are most instructive: because it is precisely where existentialism is most powerful—in its account of individual finitude and contingency—that it is least equipped to say what the flower on the path, shared with the one you love, actually is.

5.2.1 Heidegger: Thrownness, the Moment of Vision, and the Limits of *Mitsein*

Heidegger's fundamental ontology begins with a gesture that is still, after nearly a century, philosophically radical: the refusal to start with a subject who then encounters a world (Heidegger 1962). *Dasein*—the being for whom being is an issue—is always already in the world, always already thrown (*geworfen*) into a situation not of its choosing, always already ahead of itself in its care (*Sorge*) for its own being. The world is not an external reality that consciousness represents; it is the always-already-there within which *Dasein* finds itself.

Within this framework, contingency receives a rigorous treatment. The flower on the path is, in Heideggerian terms, a piece of *Zeug*—equipment, ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) in the first instance, revealing its worldly character only when it breaks down or solicits attention in a way that interrupts the flow of absorbed coping. When the flower arrests the walker's movement, it withdraws from the ready-to-hand and becomes present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), an object of contemplation. More deeply, the flower participates in

the structure of *Befindlichkeit*—attunement or mood—which is the way in which *Dasein* always already finds itself disposed toward the world before any explicit cognition. The walker who notices the flower does so in a mood, and the flower’s beauty is not a property of the flower alone but the joint product of the flower and the attunement through which it is encountered.

So far, so illuminating. But what of the shared encounter? Heidegger does, of course, have a concept of being-with: *Mitsein*, being-with-others, is part of the existential structure of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962). *Dasein* is not first a solitary subject who then enters into relations with others; it is constitutively with-others, and the others are not objects it encounters but fellow *Daseins* whose being-in-the-world is always already co-constitutive of its own. The concept is important, and it marks a genuine advance over any simple subject-object model of intersubjectivity.

And yet *Mitsein* is not enough for what the shared flower requires. The difficulty is structural: in Heidegger’s account, *Mitsein* is an existential—a necessary feature of *Dasein*’s ontological structure—but it remains *Dasein*’s structure. The others are co-constitutive of *my* being-in-the-world; they enter into *my* care-structure; they shape *my* attunement. The fundamental unit of analysis remains *Dasein*—and *Dasein* is always mine (*je meines*): “the being of which this entity is an issue is in each case mine” (Heidegger 1962). *Mitsein* is a structural feature of a being that remains fundamentally individual; it does not displace the individual as the locus of experience and event.

The moment of vision (*Augenblick*)—that authentic temporality in which *Dasein* grasps its situation in the fullness of its thrownness and projection—is likewise *Dasein*’s moment. It is the moment in which *I* achieve authentic self-understanding, in which *my* ownmost possibilities are disclosed. The concept has the precision and intensity that the shared flower seems to call for—that sudden illumination, that sense of the present moment held in its fullness—but it remains, in Heidegger’s framework, an achievement of the individual *Dasein*, not of the relational field between two *Daseins*.

The Heideggerian limit. Heidegger’s *Mitsein* establishes that being-with-others is on-

tologically constitutive of *Dasein*. But it does not establish that there is an ontological unit—a *we-ness*—that is prior to or irreducible to the individual *Daseins* who compose it. The relational field remains, in Heidegger, a feature of *Dasein*'s structure rather than a structure in its own right.

5.2.2 Sartre: Radical Contingency and the Hell of the Other

If Heidegger's account of contingency is embedded in the structure of thrownness, Sartre's is more radical still (Sartre 1956). For Sartre, existence precedes essence: there is no pregiven nature or telos that determines what a human being is or ought to be. The human being is condemned to be free—condemned because it did not choose this freedom, and yet cannot escape it; every situation, however constraining, leaves a residue of choice, and that residue is absolute. Contingency, for Sartre, goes all the way down: not just the situation into which one is thrown, but the very fact of one's existence is radically contingent, *de trop*—superfluous, unjustified, in excess of any reason.

This is a profound and in many ways accurate description of something. The flower on the path is, in Sartrean terms, *en-soi*—being-in-itself, brute, self-identical, without the self-transcendence that characterises human consciousness. The encounter with the flower is an encounter of *pour-soi*—being-for-itself, the human consciousness that is always already beyond itself in its projects—with the in-itself. The beauty of the flower is not in the flower; it is the *pour-soi*'s nihilating projection onto the opacity of being-in-itself.

But Sartre's account of the other—and here is what concerns us—is famously dark. The other is the gaze that turns me into an object: “hell is other people” (*Lenfer, c'est les autres*) is not a casual remark but an ontological diagnosis (Sartre 1956). The other threatens my freedom by constituting me as a facticity, a thing with determinate properties seen from the outside. The fundamental relation to the other is conflict: either I objectify the other or the other objectifies me, and love—Sartre is unsparing here—is the attempt to possess the other's freedom while keeping it free, which is a contradiction, and which therefore always fails.

This is not a framework in which shared happiness can find a home. The shared flower, in Sartre's account, is not an event in a relational field; it is a moment in which two freedoms, each radical and each threatening to the other, happen to direct their nihilating projections in the same direction. Whatever happiness arises is mine—my consciousness, my project, my freedom, temporarily and unstably aligned with another's. The sharing does not constitute a third thing; it is at best a momentary convergence of two absolute subjectivities that remain, at bottom, in competition.

The Sartrean limit. Sartre's radical contingency and his account of freedom are philosophically indispensable. But his ontology of conflict between freedoms makes genuine relational co-constitution—the idea that the sharing of a contingent event might produce something irreducible to either participant—structurally impossible. The *pour-soi* cannot share a world; it can only encounter other *pour-sois* in a field of mutual threat and objectification.

5.2.3 Merleau-Ponty: Embodiment and the Flesh of the World

Merleau-Ponty represents a significant departure from both Heidegger and Sartre, and one that moves—without fully arriving—in the direction this paper needs to go (Merleau-Ponty 1962). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not the object of a constituting consciousness but the very medium of our being-in-the-world: perception is not representation but bodily engagement, and the perceived world is not a collection of objects but a field of solicitations and affordances structured by the body's capacities.

What this means for the encounter with the flower is significant. The beauty of the flower is not the *pour-soi*'s nihilating projection onto an opaque in-itself; it is the response of a body-subject that is already attuned to the visible world through its motor habits, its perceptual history, its carnal engagement with things. The flower solicits the body; the body responds; and the beauty is in neither alone but in the encounter between a body with certain capacities and a world that calls forth those capacities.

More importantly for the shared encounter, Merleau-Ponty develops—especially in his later work on the “flesh of the world” (*la chair du monde*)—an account of intercorporeality: the idea that bodies are not isolated monads but participants in a shared carnal field, reversible touching-and-touched, seeing-and-seen (Merleau-Ponty 1962). When two embodied subjects perceive the same flower, they do so through bodies that are already in a kind of pre-personal intercorporeal relation, and the shared perception is not simply two separate perceptions happening simultaneously but a co-perception structured by this intercorporeal field.

This is genuinely closer to what the shared flower requires. The embodied resonance that neuroscience will later document—the mirror neuron system’s cross-individual activation, the physiological synchrony of co-present bodies—has its philosophical anticipation in Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality. And yet even here the relational field does not fully achieve ontological priority: the flesh of the world is a field of perception, and the co-perception of the flower is not yet the relational co-evolution that the GRB framework will identify as the locus of happiness. Intercorporeality is a structure of shared embodiment; it is not yet an account of how a contingent event descends upon a relational system and triggers the co-evolutionary dynamics in which happiness consists.

5.2.4 Buber: The *I–Thou* and the Threshold Not Crossed

Of all the existentialist and phenomenological thinkers, it is Martin Buber who comes closest to what this paper requires—and whose proximity to the goal makes his ultimate limitation all the more instructive (Buber 1970).

Buber’s fundamental distinction between the *I–It* and the *I–Thou* attitudes is well known. In the *I–It* attitude, the other is an object in my world, to be used, analysed, represented; the relation is asymmetric, the other an *It* that I constitute as an object of experience. In the *I–Thou* attitude, the other is not an object but a subject who addresses me and to whom I respond; the relation is genuine meeting (*Begegnung*), in which both parties are transformed and neither can be reduced to what they were before the meeting. “In the beginning is the relation” (*Im Anfang ist die Beziehung*)—this is Buber’s most radical claim, and it is the one that points most directly toward the GRB framework: the relation is not secondary to the relata but constitutive of them.

And yet Buber does not complete the move that GRB requires. The *I–Thou* relation, for Buber, is a relation *between* an I and a Thou: it constitutes both, but both remain in some sense prior to the relation that constitutes them. The I that enters the *I–Thou* relation is still, in Buber’s account, an I that *has* this relation—that can also fall back into the *I–It* attitude, that can address or fail to address the other as Thou. The relation is the highest form of human existence for Buber, but it is not the *ontological ground* of the subject; it is rather the subject’s highest possibility.

Furthermore, Buber’s account of the *I–Thou* is primarily vertical—the meeting of the human I with the eternal Thou, God, as the ground of all genuine meeting—and while the horizontal meeting of two human beings is central to his thought, the relation between two finite *I*s is always mediated by and pointing toward the eternal Thou. This gives the *I–Thou* meeting a transcendent orientation that the GRB framework, with its immanent account of relational dynamics, does not share.

The Buberian threshold. Buber’s “in the beginning is the relation” is the closest approach, within the existentialist and phenomenological tradition, to the ontological claim that the GRB framework requires. But Buber does not complete the move: the relation remains, for him, the highest possibility of subjects who are in some sense already there to enter it, rather than the generative ground from which subjects emerge. The threshold that GRB crosses—locating the subject’s very constitution in the relational field—Buber approaches but does not step over.

5.2.5 The Shared Diagnosis

Across these four figures—and one could extend the survey to Jaspers’s *Existenzkommunikation*, to Levinas’s ethics of the face, to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity in Husserl and Schütz—the same structural feature appears: the existentialist tradition, in all its richness, takes the individual subject as its fundamental unit, and adds the other, the relation, the co-presence as a modification of, or supplement to, or structure

within, that individual subject's existence. Even Buber, who comes closest to reversing this priority, does not fully achieve the reversal.

The consequence for the philosophy of happiness is decisive. If the subject is always already individual, then happiness—whatever its content—is something that happens *in* the subject: in its attunement, its freedom, its bodily engagement, its meeting with the Thou. The other, the relation, the sharing, can enrich or constitute the conditions for this happiness; but the happiness itself remains, in the last analysis, *mine*. The shared flower, on this account, is either two separate happinesses occurring simultaneously, or one happiness (mine) that happens to require the other's presence as its condition. What it cannot be—within the existentialist framework—is a happiness that is *irreducibly* of the relational field, that cannot be located in either participant because it does not reside in either.

This is precisely what the GRB framework will claim. But to understand what that claim requires, we must first examine the other great tradition this paper must engage and move beyond: the eudaimonist tradition, with its rich account of what flourishing consists in—and its equally systematic assumption that flourishing is the flourishing of an individual.

5.3. The Presuppositions of Traditional Eudaimonism

The eudaimonist tradition is, in one sense, already more hospitable to the question of shared happiness than existentialism. Where existentialism begins with the individual thrown into a world of contingency and threat, eudaimonism begins with the question of the good life—of what it is for a human being to flourish—and this question has, from Aristotle onward, been understood to implicate the social and relational dimensions of human existence. Aristotle knew that human beings are political animals (*zōon politikon*), that friendship (*philia*) is among the highest goods, that the virtues are exercised in a *polis* and cannot be fully realised in isolation (Aristotle 2000). The eudaimonist tradition is not naive about relationality.

And yet it shares, at the level of its fundamental ontology, the same structural feature that limits the existentialist account: the subject of flourishing is the individual. *Eudaimonia*

is something that a person *has*, or *achieves*, or *lives*. The others, the relations, the community, are conditions for flourishing or constituents of it, but they are conditions for and constituents of *my* flourishing—the flourishing of a subject who is, in the last analysis, individual. This paper’s task in the present section is to trace this structural feature through the major nodes of the eudaimonist tradition, showing not only where each account falls short of the shared flower but, more importantly, *why* it falls short—what structural assumption would need to be revised for the account to accommodate what the shared flower reveals.

5.3.1 Aristotle: *Eudaimonia*, *Phronesis*, and the Social Conditions of Individual Flourishing

Aristotle’s account of *eudaimonia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the founding document of the eudaimonist tradition, and it remains, twenty-four centuries later, philosophically indispensable (Aristotle 2000). *Eudaimonia*—often translated as happiness, but better rendered as flourishing or living-well-and-doing-well—is not a feeling or a subjective state but an activity: specifically, the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (*aretē*) and, if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete. It is not something that happens to a person but something that a person does—or, more precisely, something that a person *is* in the doing: the virtuous person does not merely act virtuously but acts from virtue, with the right motivation, at the right time, toward the right objects, in the right manner.

The social and relational dimensions of this account are real and important. The virtues—courage, justice, generosity, practical wisdom—are exercised in relation to others, and some of them, like justice and friendship-virtue, are constitutively relational: one cannot be just or a good friend in isolation. *Phronesis*—practical wisdom, the capacity to deliberate well about what conduces to flourishing in particular circumstances—requires experience of the social world and is exercised in it. And *philia*—friendship in Aristotle’s rich sense, encompassing everything from utility-friendship to the highest friendship of those who share virtue and love each other for what they are—is not merely a condition for flourishing but one of its constituents: the happy person needs friends, and not merely as instruments or as mirrors of the self, but as genuine others whose good one pursues for their own sake.

All of this is true, and this paper will draw on it in §5.11 when it re-reads these concepts under the GRB framework. But the structural point stands: *eudaimonia* is *my* activity, *my* excellent functioning, *my* flourishing. When Aristotle says that the happy person needs friends, he means that friendship is a constituent of *my* happy life—that without friends, *I* cannot fully flourish. The friend is not a co-subject of a shared flourishing; the friend is a condition for and partial constituent of *my individual* flourishing. Even the highest *philia*—in which two friends love each other for what they are, share a life, and pursue virtue together—is, in Aristotle’s account, a relationship that constitutes and enriches two individual *eudaimonias*, not a third thing that is the flourishing of the relation itself.

The Aristotelian presupposition. For Aristotle, the social and relational dimensions of flourishing are real and philosophically central. But they are understood as conditions for, and constituents of, the individual’s *eudaimonia*. The relational field is not itself the subject of flourishing; it is the medium in which individual flourishing is achieved and expressed.

5.3.2 Epicurus and the Stoics: Retreat from Relation

The Hellenistic schools represent, in different ways, a retreat from Aristotle’s social eudaimonism—a move toward an account of flourishing that is more independent of the social world and, crucially, more independent of what happens in it. This retreat is philosophically motivated: if flourishing depends on relations, communities, and external goods, then it is vulnerable to fortune, and the Hellenistic thinkers were deeply concerned with providing an account of happiness that was, to the greatest possible degree, within the agent’s own power.

Epicurus locates *eudaimonia* in pleasure (*hēdonē*), specifically in the absence of pain (*aponia*) and mental disturbance (*ataraxia*) (Epicurus 1994). But the pleasure that matters is not sensory excitement—which typically brings more pain in its wake than it is

worth—but the calm pleasure of a life free from fear, desire, and disturbance. Epicurus does value friendship highly: the friends of the Garden are central to his account of the pleasant life, and his famous remark that it is more pleasant to give than to receive a benefit points toward something like a relational account of pleasure. But the fundamental structure remains individualist: *ataraxia* is a state of *my* soul, achieved by *my* philosophical practice, in which *I* am no longer disturbed by false beliefs about death, the gods, and the nature of pleasure. The friends of the Garden are conditions for this state, not co-subjects of a shared state.

The Stoics push further in the direction of self-sufficiency (Aurelius 2002). For the Stoic sage, *eudaimonia* consists in virtue alone, and virtue is entirely within the agent’s power regardless of external circumstances. The preferred indifferents (*prohēgmena adiaphora*)—health, wealth, friendship, reputation—are to be pursued when available but do not constitute happiness; only virtue does. This means that the Stoic sage can be happy on the rack, and that the loss of friends, community, or all external goods leaves happiness intact. The relational world is, for Stoicism, philosophically peripheral to flourishing: cosmopolitan concern for all rational beings (*oikeiōsis*) extends one’s moral concern to the whole of humanity, but this extension is an expression of the sage’s virtue, not a dependence of the sage’s happiness on any particular relation.

Apatheia—the Stoic ideal of freedom from the passions—is, from the GRB perspective, the clearest formulation of what relational happiness must oppose. For the emotions that arise in the shared encounter with the flower—the joy, the resonance, the sense of being touched together by the contingent—are precisely the kind of affective engagement that *apatheia* aims to transcend. The Stoic sage has achieved a happiness that is invulnerable to the flower’s beauty and indifferent to whether it is shared—a happiness that is, by that very invulnerability, no longer capable of the relational co-evolution that the GRB framework will identify as flourishing’s highest form.

5.3.3 Csikszentmihalyi: Flow and the Individual in Optimal Experience

The modern psychological tradition has given the eudaimonist inheritance new empirical content, and no concept has been more influential in this tradition than Csikszentmihalyi’s account of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow is the state of optimal experience that

occurs when a person is fully absorbed in a challenging activity, when skill and challenge are matched, when self-consciousness recedes and time is distorted, when the activity is intrinsically rewarding and the person feels a sense of effortless control. Athletes, musicians, surgeons, chess players, and rock climbers have all reported this state, and Csikszentmihalyi's research has documented its structure with considerable empirical precision.

The concept is philosophically significant: flow is not mere pleasure but engagement, not the satisfaction of desire but the full exercise of capacity, and in this sense it is closer to Aristotelian *energeia* than to Epicurean *hēdonē*. The person in flow is not passive but active, not receiving but doing, and the doing is its own reward. This captures something important about the structure of happiness that the hedonic tradition misses.

And yet the structural presupposition is evident: flow is an individual's experience, arising from the individual's engagement with a task. The challenge-skill balance is the individual's challenge-skill balance. The absorption is the individual's absorption. Even when flow occurs in a social activity—team sports, musical ensemble, collaborative work—the flow is understood as something that each individual player or musician or worker either achieves or does not achieve. The team's victory may create the conditions for the individual player's flow; it does not itself constitute a relational flow that is irreducible to the sum of individual flows.

This is not a trivial limitation. Consider the scene with which this paper began: two people sitting together, doing nothing, in the kind of still and wordless co-presence that is one of the deepest forms of shared happiness. There is no task. There is no challenge. There is no skill being exercised. On Csikszentmihalyi's account, there is no flow—and therefore, on the most influential modern account of optimal experience, no happiness of the kind that concerns us here. The gap between what the theory predicts and what anyone who has experienced this kind of shared stillness knows to be true is itself a philosophical datum. It points to the need for a concept of relational flow that is not derivative of individual flow but genuinely different in kind—a concept that §5.11.4 will develop.

5.3.4 Maslow: Self-Actualisation and the Hierarchy of Individual Needs

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is perhaps the most widely known framework in the psychology of human motivation and flourishing (Maslow 1954). The hierarchy moves from the physiological needs at the base—food, water, shelter, sleep—through safety, belonging and love, and esteem, to self-actualisation at the apex: the need to realise one's full potential, to become what one is capable of becoming. Maslow's self-actualising persons are characterised by a rich set of qualities—peak experiences, democratic character, deep interpersonal relations, autonomy, continued freshness of appreciation—that give the concept philosophical substance beyond mere self-help.

The relational dimensions of the hierarchy are acknowledged: belonging and love constitute the third level, and Maslow's self-actualisers are typically described as having profound relationships with a few significant others. But the structure of the hierarchy is unmistakably individualist: the higher needs are the individual's needs, self-actualisation is the individual's actualisation, and the relational goods at level three are understood as needs whose satisfaction enables the individual to ascend toward the apex. The other is the satisfier of my belonging-need, the partner in my love, the mirror of my esteem—but the subject whose needs are being met, whose potential is being realised, whose peak experiences are being had, is always and only the individual.

Under GRB, this hierarchy requires not merely modification but inversion at its apex. If the subject of flourishing is the relational field, then what Maslow places at the top—individual self-actualisation, the realisation of the individual's full potential—is not the highest form of flourishing but a penultimate one. The highest form is the co-evolution of a relational system that generates something irreducible to either participant: not my self-actualisation, not your self-actualisation, but the relational actualisation of a shared field that neither of us could have become alone.

5.3.5 Self-Determination Theory: Relation as Need, Not Ground

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (SDT) represents one of the most sophisticated and empirically grounded accounts of human motivation and flourishing in contemporary psychology (Deci and Ryan 1985). SDT identifies three basic psychological needs whose satisfaction is necessary for well-being: autonomy (the experience of volition and self-

endorsement of one's actions), competence (the experience of effectiveness and mastery), and relatedness (the experience of meaningful connection with others). All three needs are universal, and the failure to satisfy any one of them undermines well-being regardless of the satisfaction of the others.

The inclusion of relatedness as a basic need is philosophically significant, and SDT's empirical research on the conditions for relatedness—its findings on the role of autonomy-supportive environments, on the damage done by controlling relationships, on the importance of genuine rather than contingent regard—has genuine philosophical implications. SDT knows that relationships matter for flourishing and has studied how and why they matter with empirical rigour.

But the structural presupposition is once again evident: relatedness is a *need* of the individual, a need whose satisfaction contributes to the *individual's* well-being. The relational other is the satisfier of my relatedness need—or, in the more nuanced SDT account, the co-participant in an interaction that either supports or thwarts my autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The relational field is not itself a subject of flourishing; it is the medium in which individual needs are satisfied or frustrated.

The SDT presupposition. Self-determination theory's inclusion of relatedness as a basic need marks a genuine advance over purely individualist accounts of well-being. But relatedness remains, in SDT, a need of the individual rather than an ontological ground of the subject. The theory asks how the individual's need for relatedness is satisfied; it does not ask whether the individual is, at a deeper level, constituted by and in the relational field.

5.3.6 Frankl: Meaning and the Individual Who Finds It

Viktor Frankl's account of meaning as the fundamental human motivation—forged in the extremity of the concentration camp and developed in his logotherapy—is philosophically

and humanly one of the most powerful in the modern tradition (Frankl 1959). Frankl's insight that human beings can endure almost any *how* if they have a *why*—that meaning, not pleasure or power, is the primary human drive—has the kind of existential weight that only lived testimony can give to a philosophical claim.

For Frankl, meaning can be found in three ways: through what one gives to the world (creative values), through what one receives from the world (experiential values, including love and beauty), and through the attitude one takes toward unavoidable suffering (attitudinal values). The second category—experiential values, including love—points most directly toward relational happiness: the encounter with another person in love, for Frankl, is one of the highest forms of meaning-discovery.

But Frankl's account remains, structurally, an account of how the individual finds or creates meaning. Even in love, what happens is that *I* encounter *you* and, in that encounter, *I* discover the full depth of your personhood—your uniqueness, your irreplaceability, the specific way in which you are you rather than anyone else. This discovery is profoundly significant, and Frankl describes it with genuine philosophical care. But the subject who makes the discovery, who finds meaning, who is constituted by the encounter, is still the individual: the encounter enriches me, transforms me, gives me meaning; it does not produce a third ontological unit—a relational being—whose flourishing is distinct from and irreducible to mine.

5.3.7 Seligman's PERMA and the Aggregation of Individual Well-Being

Martin Seligman's PERMA model—Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—is the most influential framework in contemporary positive psychology (Seligman 2011). It is explicitly pluralist: well-being is not a single thing but a multidimensional construct, and no single component is sufficient or necessary for flourishing. The inclusion of Relationships as a distinct component marks a significant development from earlier hedonic models.

But the structure of aggregation that the PERMA model employs—well-being as the sum or combination of five components, each of which contributes to the individual's overall flourishing—reproduces, at the level of theory, the individualist presupposition. Relationships are good for *my* well-being; positive emotions are *my* positive emotions;

engagement is *my* engagement; meaning is the meaning *I* find; accomplishments are *my* accomplishments. The relational component (R) is not fundamentally different in kind from the others: it is one input among five into the individual's overall well-being score.

Under GRB, this aggregation misses something essential. The happiness of the shared flower is not my positive emotion (P) plus a contribution to my relationships (R): it is a qualitatively different phenomenon that cannot be decomposed into individual components because it does not arise from the individual but from the relational field. The PERMA model, for all its sophistication, is a model of the individual's well-being in a social context, not a model of the well-being of a relational system.

5.3.8 The Shared Presupposition and What It Costs

Across the eudaimonist tradition—from Aristotle's virtuous activity through the Stoics' self-sufficient sage, from Csikszentmihalyi's flow through Maslow's self-actualisation, from Frankl's meaning through Seligman's PERMA—a single structural presupposition runs: **the subject of flourishing is the individual**. The others, the relations, the community, the shared encounters with contingent beauty, are conditions for, constituents of, or contributors to individual flourishing. They are not themselves the subjects of flourishing.

This presupposition is not arbitrary. It reflects a deep and in many respects accurate picture of human experience: I do experience my own happiness; I am the one who feels the joy, notices the flower, is moved by the encounter. There is something that it is like to *be me* encountering the flower, and this something is genuinely mine in a way that cannot be entirely dissolved into the relational field. The paper does not deny this. What it denies is that this is the whole story—that the individual's experience of happiness exhausts the phenomenon, that the shared encounter with the flower can be fully accounted for by decomposing it into individual experiences and summing.

What the shared flower reveals is that there is a level of the phenomenon that the individualist presupposition systematically misses: the level of the relational field itself, in which something happens that is not in me and not in you but between us, and in which the happiness that arises is an emergent property of that field rather than a property of either of us. To account for this level, a different framework is needed—one that begins not with the individual who then enters into relations but with the relational field that

generates individuals and in which they continue to be constituted. That framework is what the next section introduces.

5.4. The Relational Turn: Whose Contingency?

The two preceding sections have traced, through the existentialist and eudaimonist traditions, a shared structural presupposition: that the subject of experience, of contingency, of flourishing, is the individual. The others, the relations, the shared encounters, are modifications of, conditions for, or contributions to this individual subject's experience and flourishing. What we need now is not a further critique of this presupposition but its replacement—a positive account of the ontological framework within which the shared flower can be understood on its own terms, without reduction to the individual experiences of the two people who share it.

This section executes what we call the relational turn: the move from an ontology of individuals-in-relation to an ontology of the relational field as the primary unit of analysis. The move is not merely terminological. It requires a genuine shift in what we take to be the fundamental explanatory unit, the primary subject of predication, the locus of events and of flourishing. We proceed in three steps: first, we establish the ontological claim about the primacy of the relational field; second, we relocate contingency within this framework, showing that the primary subject of contingency is the relation rather than the individual; third, we introduce the Generative Relational Being (GRB) framework as the theoretical home within which the paper's subsequent arguments will be developed.

5.4.1 From Individuals-in-Relation to the Relational Field

The standard picture of human sociality begins with individuals and adds relations. Two people exist; they enter into a relation; the relation modifies each of them in various ways; when the relation ends, they revert—changed, perhaps, but still fundamentally themselves—to individual existence. On this picture, the relation is ontologically secondary: it presupposes the individuals who compose it, and it is constituted by their choices, interactions, and mutual adjustments. The relation is real, but it is real as a property of or a connection between pre-existing individuals.

The GRB framework begins from the opposite direction (Huang 2025a). The relational field is not constituted by pre-existing individuals; it is the generative ground from which individuals emerge and in which they continue to be constituted. This claim has several components that must be distinguished.

The first is ontogenetic: the human subject does not arrive in the world already formed and then enter into relations. It is constituted, from the beginning, in and through relations—with caregivers, with the social world, with language, with the material environment. The developmental psychology of attachment (Bowlby 1969), the neuroscience of co-regulation (Feldman 2007), the psychoanalytic account of subject-formation through the encounter with the other (Lacan 2006): all of these converge on the claim that the individual subject is not a pre-given datum but a developmental achievement, and that the relations in which it develops are not external conditions of that development but internal to it. The subject that emerges from this process is not a self that *has* relations; it is a self that *is*, in its very structure, relational.

The second component is constitutive: even the adult subject, already formed, continues to be constituted in and through its ongoing relations. This is not merely the claim that relations influence or modify the subject—that is compatible with the standard picture—but the stronger claim that the subject's ongoing identity, its sense of self, its emotional and cognitive architecture, is continuously being shaped by and in its relational engagements. The person I am when I am with you is not the same person I am when I am alone, and this is not because I am performing a role or suppressing my true self; it is because my self is, in part, constituted by this relation, and the relation is a living, dynamic structure that continuously generates the selves it relates.

The third component is emergent: the relational field produces phenomena that are not reducible to the properties of the individuals who compose it. This is the component most directly relevant to the philosophy of happiness. The happiness of the shared flower is not the sum of two individual happinesses; it is an emergent property of the relational field—something that arises at the level of the field and cannot be located in either participant. This emergent property is real—it is experienced, it has effects, it can be studied—but it requires a level of description that the individualist framework cannot provide.

The ontological primacy of the relational field. The relational field is not constituted by pre-existing individuals who enter into relations. It is the generative ground from which individual subjects emerge and in which they are continuously constituted. The subject of relational experience—including the experience of shared happiness—is not the individual but the relational field, and the properties of this field are not reducible to the properties of the individuals who participate in it.

5.4.2 Relocating Contingency: The Flower Belongs to the Relation

With this ontological framework in place, we can now ask the question that titles this section: whose contingency is the flower's contingency? On the standard individualist picture, the answer is clear: the flower is contingent with respect to each individual who encounters it. It might not have been there; either person might not have been walking that path; either might have been looking elsewhere. The contingency is, so to speak, doubly individual: contingent for me, contingent for you, and the sharing of the encounter is a further contingency layered on top.

But this account misses the structure of what actually happens when the flower is shared. The flower does not descend upon two individuals who then decide to share their individual encounters with each other. The flower descends upon the relational field—upon the *between* that the two people have constituted through their shared life, their shared attention, their history of shared presence. It enters the relational system as an event in that system, and its significance is constituted by the relational field as a whole, not by either individual separately.

This claim can be given more precise content. Consider what it would mean for the flower to enter the relational field rather than the individual. The two people are walking together—which is to say, they are already in a mode of joint attention, of shared bodily orientation, of co-present awareness. They are not two separate individuals who happen to be occupying adjacent spatial positions; they are a coupled system, with a shared

attentional field, a shared history of meaning, a shared set of expectations and sensitivities that have developed through their life together. When the flower appears, it appears within this shared attentional field; it is not first noticed by one and then communicated to the other, but is—in the most direct cases—noticed jointly, as an event in the shared world rather than in either individual world.

The act of sharing—the touch on the arm, the word *look*, the inclined gaze—is not the communication of a private experience from one individual to another. It is the *constitutive act* by which the flower is introduced into the relational system as a relational event. Before the sharing, the flower may have been noticed by one person; after the sharing, it has become an event in the relational field, with a significance that is generated by the field as a whole and that neither person could have generated alone. The sharing does not report an event that has already occurred; it *produces* the event in its full relational character.

The relational subject of contingency. The contingent event—the flower on the path—is not, in the shared encounter, an event in the experience of two individuals. It is an event in the relational field, constituted as such by the act of sharing. The primary subject of contingency, in the shared encounter, is the relation, not the individual. The flower belongs, first and most fundamentally, to the *between*.

This relocation of contingency has far-reaching consequences. It means that the happiness that arises from the shared encounter with the flower is not the sum of two individual happinesses, each caused by the individual's encounter with a contingent beautiful thing. It is the happiness of the relational field responding to a contingent event that has entered it—a happiness that is, in its very structure, irreducibly relational. And it means that the capacity to receive contingent events in this way—to allow them to enter the relational field and be constituted as relational events—is itself a form of relational flourishing: a capacity of the relational system, not of either individual.

5.4.3 The Generative Relational Being Framework

The Generative Relational Being (GRB) framework, developed in the mother paper of this series (Huang 2025a), provides the theoretical scaffolding within which the arguments of this paper are developed. We summarise its key features here insofar as they bear on the philosophy of happiness, reserving the formal development for §5.6 and §5.7.

The GRB framework takes as its fundamental unit the **generative relational field**: the dynamic structure of mutual constitution, ongoing co-evolution, and emergent property-generation that characterises an intimate relational system. A generative relational field is not a static structure but a living process: it generates the selves that participate in it, it generates meanings and values that are irreducible to the contributions of either participant, and it generates its own continuation through the spiral structure that Paper IX analysed in terms of geometric phase and holonomy (Huang 2025b).

Several features of the GRB framework are directly relevant to the philosophy of happiness.

First, generativity. The relational field is not merely a site of exchange between pre-existing subjects; it is a generative system that produces—in the sense of genuinely bringing into existence—phenomena that would not exist without it. The happiness of the shared flower is one such phenomenon: it is generated by the relational field, not by either individual, and it could not have been generated by either alone. Generativity, in this sense, is the relational field’s fundamental characteristic: it is constitutively productive of new being, new value, new experience.

Second, the three registers. Following the psychoanalytic tradition (Lacan 2006), the GRB framework distinguishes three registers in which relational phenomena occur: the imaginary (the register of image, identification, and the specular relation), the symbolic (the register of language, law, and the social bond), and the real (the register of the unrepresentable remainder, the irreducible particularity that exceeds symbolisation). Relational happiness, on the GRB account, is primarily a phenomenon of the real register: it is the happiness of an encounter with the irreducible particularity of the other and of the shared moment, an encounter that resists full symbolisation and exceeds the imaginary idealisations that typically structure the early stages of intimate relations. This

is why the shared flower—unremarkable, contingent, not arranged for effect—can carry such weight: it is an encounter with the real, with the simple contingency of things as they are, shared in the mode of genuine co-presence.

Third, holonomy and the spiral. Paper IX established that the good relational cycle is characterised by positive holonomy: after traversing a closed loop in the space of relational situations, the relational system returns not to its starting point but to a new point that carries the accumulated phase of the journey (Huang 2025b). This is the spiral structure of relational flourishing—the structure that distinguishes genuine development from mere repetition, and the good cycle from the vicious one. The happiness of the shared flower participates in this structure: each shared contingent event is a small traversal of the relational field, and the happiness it generates is the holonomy accumulated in that traversal—a tiny increment of relational phase that, over time and accumulated sharing, constitutes the spiral of a shared life.

Fourth, non-possession. The GRB framework, drawing on the Daoist concept of *xuande* (玄德—the dark virtue: to generate without possessing, to act without presuming, to foster without ruling), emphasises that the happiness of the relational field cannot be possessed by either participant (Laozi 1963). The attempt to possess the shared flower—to hold it, to claim it as mine, to use it as an object of exchange—is precisely the move that extinguishes the relational happiness it might otherwise generate. Relational happiness is available only to those who can receive it without grasping, share it without hoarding, and let it pass without clinging. This is not a counsel of indifference but of a particular kind of attentiveness: the attentiveness that allows the relational field to generate what it can generate when it is not constrained by the possessive structures of the individual ego.

5.4.4 The Question of the Subject Revisited

The relational turn, as we have described it, raises an obvious question: if the subject of flourishing is the relational field rather than the individual, does this mean that the individual's experience of happiness is philosophically irrelevant? Does the GRB framework dissolve the individual into the relation, leaving no remainder?

The answer is no, and it is important to be precise about why. The GRB framework

does not deny that individuals exist, that individuals have experiences, or that there is something that it is like to be a particular person encountering a flower on a particular afternoon. What it denies is that the individual's experience, taken in isolation, exhausts the philosophical phenomenon. The individual's experience of happiness in the shared encounter is real, but it is real as the individual's *mode of access* to a phenomenon that is itself relational—in the same way that a person's experience of a melody is real, but the melody is not *in* the person; it is in the musical structure that the person perceives.

The individual, on the GRB account, is not dissolved into the relation but *constituted* by it—which means that the individual retains a genuine particularity, a genuine subjectivity, a genuine interiority, but that this particularity, subjectivity, and interiority are themselves relational products rather than pregiven data. The self that encounters the flower is already shaped by this relation, already carries the history of shared contingencies that have entered the relational field, already perceives the flower through eyes that have been formed by shared seeing. The individual's experience is the relational field's experience, refracted through one of the perspectives it has generated.

This means, concretely, that the happiness of the shared flower is experienced *by* the individuals—it is not a happiness that floats free of any experiential subject—but it is experienced *as* something that exceeds each individual, something that is felt to come from the between, something that neither could have generated alone. This *feeling of excess*—the sense that what is happening is more than what I alone could have produced—is not an illusion. It is the individual's accurate perception of an emergent relational property, the felt signal of the relational field's generative activity. In §5.9, we will describe this feeling more precisely; in §5.10, we will give it its theoretical articulation. For now, it is enough to note that the GRB framework does not require us to choose between the individual's experience and the relational field's generativity: both are real, and the individual's experience is precisely the experience of the relational field's generativity, felt from the inside of one of the perspectives it has constituted.

The individual within the relational field. The GRB framework does not dissolve the individual into the relational field. It reconceives the individual as a product of the

relational field—a perspective constituted by and within the field—whose experience of happiness is the field’s generative activity felt from one of its constituted viewpoints. The individual’s experience of relational happiness is both genuinely individual (it is felt by this person, from this perspective) and genuinely relational (it is the experience of something that exceeds the individual and belongs to the field).

With this framework in place, we are ready to examine, in the next section, the structure of the contingent event’s descent into the relational field—and the double face of that descent, which brings not only joy but also, at times, the shared weight of suffering.

5.5. The Descent of the Contingent Event into the Relational System

The previous section established that the primary subject of contingency, in the shared encounter, is the relational field rather than the individual. The flower belongs to the *between*. But this claim, stated at the level of ontological framework, requires more precise elaboration: *how*, exactly, does a contingent event enter a relational system? What is the structure of its descent? And what happens to the relational system when it receives such an event—not only when the event is beautiful and welcome, but when it is painful, unwanted, shattering?

This section answers these questions in three movements. The first analyses the act of sharing as the constitutive mechanism by which a contingent event becomes a relational event. The second examines the spatial and temporal structure of the *between*—the relational space in which the event takes on its relational character. The third confronts the double face of contingency: the fact that the same ontological structure that makes the shared flower possible also makes shared grief, shared loss, and shared trauma possible—and that a theory of relational happiness that cannot account for this double face is incomplete.

5.5.1 Sharing as Constitutive Act

The ordinary understanding of sharing treats it as a communicative act: one person has an experience, and then communicates it to another, who thereby comes to share in it. On this model, the experience is prior to the sharing; the sharing is its report. This is the model implicit in most philosophical and psychological treatments of social emotion and joint attention, and it is not wrong as a description of many cases. But it misses the philosophically most important cases—the cases in which sharing is not the report of a prior experience but its *constitutive condition*.

Consider, again, the flower on the path. In the most philosophically significant version of the scene, the flower is noticed jointly: there is no moment in which one person privately notices the flower and then decides to share it with the other. The two people are walking in the mode of co-present attention that an established intimate relation makes possible—a mode in which the attentional field is already, in some sense, shared, so that what one notices is always already available to the other's noticing. In this mode, the flower is not first an object of individual perception that is subsequently communicated; it is an object of joint perception from the beginning, entering the shared attentional field as a shared object.

But even in the cases where one person notices the flower first—where the sharing is preceded by an individual noticing—the act of sharing is not merely communicative. When one person touches the other's arm and says *look*, something happens that is not captured by the communication model: the flower is *transformed* by the act of sharing. It becomes, through the sharing, an event in the relational field rather than merely an object in one person's perceptual field. The other's gaze, directed toward the flower by the act of sharing, does not merely add a second perspective on the same object; it constitutes a new object—the flower-as-shared, the flower-in-the-between—that has properties neither person's individual perception could have produced.

This transformation can be made more precise. Before the sharing, the flower has, for the person who noticed it, whatever significance it has for that person: beauty, perhaps, or a mild pleasure, or a passing association. After the sharing, the flower has a new layer of significance: it is the flower that *we* saw together, at this particular moment in our shared

life, in this particular mood of co-presence. This new layer of significance is not added by either person individually; it is generated by the relational field in the act of sharing. The flower-as-shared is a relational object, a product of the relational field's constitutive activity, and its significance belongs to the field rather than to either participant.

Sharing as constitutive act. The act of sharing a contingent event is not the communication of a private experience from one individual to another. It is the constitutive act by which the event is introduced into the relational field and transformed into a relational event—an event whose significance is generated by the field as a whole and belongs to the *between* rather than to either participant. Sharing does not report a relational event that has already occurred; it *produces* the event in its relational character.

5.5.2 The *Between*: Topology of the Relational Space

Buber's concept of the *between* (*das Zwischen*) names something real that his own framework does not fully theorise (Buber 1970). The between is not a spatial gap between two individuals, not merely the absence of either; it is a positive ontological region—a space of co-constitution, co-presence, and emergent significance—that is generated by the relational encounter and that has its own structure. The GRB framework inherits this concept from Buber but gives it more precise content.

The between, in the GRB account, is the relational field understood as a topological space—a space with its own geometry, its own structure of neighbourhoods and distances, its own curvature. This is not merely a metaphor. The formal apparatus of differential geometry and fibre bundle theory, which [Paper IX](#) applied to the analysis of relational cycles and holonomy (Huang 2025b), applies equally to the structure of the between: the base space is the space of relational situations (the positions, orientations, histories, and attunements that constitute the relational field at any given moment), and the fibre over each point in the base space is the space of values, meanings, and affects that the relational field generates at that situation.

Within this topological framework, the descent of a contingent event into the relational field can be understood as a perturbation of the relational geometry: the event introduces a new point into the base space, curves the geometry of the field in its neighbourhood, and thereby changes the holonomy available to subsequent trajectories through the field. The flower on the path is, formally, a perturbation: it changes the curvature of the relational geometry in the neighbourhood of the moment of sharing, and this change in curvature is what makes possible the accumulation of relational phase—the generation of something new, something that was not in the field before the event entered it.

The between has a temporal as well as a spatial structure. It is not constituted anew at each encounter but carries the history of all previous encounters—all the contingent events that have entered the relational field, all the sharings that have constituted relational objects, all the moments of co-presence that have shaped the field's geometry. When the flower enters the relational field, it enters a field already richly structured by this history: it is received by a between that has been shaped by everything the two people have shared before, and its significance is partly constituted by this history. The flower is not just *a* flower; it is *this* flower, seen by *these* people, at *this* moment in the history of *their* relational field.

This historical dimension of the between is one of the reasons why the happiness of the shared flower cannot be understood in purely synchronic terms—as a property of the present moment alone. The happiness of the shared moment is, in part, the happiness of the entire history of sharing that has made this moment possible: the accumulated holonomy of a relational life, condensed and present in the experience of this particular flower at this particular moment. The flower carries, for those who have built a between together, a weight that it cannot carry for strangers, and this weight is not a projection of individual memory but a genuine property of the relational field that the two people have constituted through their shared history.

5.5.3 The Threshold of Entry: Joint Attention and Relational Readiness

Not every contingent event that occurs in the vicinity of a relational field enters that field. The flower that one person notices while the other is absorbed elsewhere, distracted, or emotionally unavailable, may enter one person's individual experience without entering

the relational field—or may enter it only partially, in a diminished form. This suggests that the relational field has a threshold of entry: a condition that must be met for a contingent event to descend upon the field as a relational event rather than remaining an individual event that is merely reported to another.

This threshold is what developmental psychologists call joint attention (*attention conjointe*): the capacity of two individuals to orient their attention toward a shared object in a way that each is aware not only of the object but of the other's attention to it (Hasson et al. 2012). Joint attention is not merely simultaneous attention to the same object; it is a triadic structure—self, other, object—in which the self's attention to the object is mediated by awareness of the other's attention, and vice versa. In joint attention, the object is constituted as a shared object: something that is in the attentional field of both, and that each attends to as something the other is also attending to.

Joint attention is, in this sense, the minimal condition for the constitution of the between as a relational space: without joint attention, there is no shared object, no relational event, no between in which the flower can take up its relational significance. But joint attention is itself a capacity that must be cultivated and maintained—a capacity that varies with the quality of the relational field, the history of shared attention, the degree of co-present attunement. This is why intimate relations, with their history of shared attention and their accumulated attunement, are more capable of joint attention than casual encounters: the between of an intimate relation is more richly structured, more sensitive to contingent events, more capable of receiving them as relational events.

The threshold character of joint attention also explains the phenomenology of the shared flower: the sense that the happiness it generates depends crucially on a quality of shared presence that is not always available, that can be lost through distraction or emotional distance, that must be actively maintained through the practices of relational attentiveness that §5.13 will discuss. The flower is always there, on the path, for anyone who passes. But it descends upon the relational field only when the field is ready to receive it—when the between is alive, when joint attention is possible, when the two people are genuinely co-present rather than merely spatially adjacent.

5.5.4 The Double Face of Contingency: Joy and Suffering

A theory of relational happiness that accounts only for the happy contingencies—the flowers, the unexpected beauties, the moments of shared delight—is philosophically incomplete. Contingency, by its nature, is indifferent to the valence of what it delivers. The same ontological structure that makes the shared flower possible—the relational field’s openness to contingent events, its readiness to receive what enters it and constitute it as a relational event—also makes shared grief, shared loss, and shared trauma possible. A diagnosis arrives. A person we love dies. An accident happens. These events too descend upon the relational field; they too are constituted as relational events by the act of shared response; they too have a significance that belongs to the between rather than to either individual alone.

This double face of contingency is not incidental to the philosophy of relational happiness but central to it. For the capacity to receive bad contingencies together—to allow the weight of loss or fear or grief to enter the relational field and be shared, rather than borne alone—is not merely a consequence of relational happiness but one of its most important expressions. The relational field that can receive only pleasant contingencies is fragile; it is the relational field that has learned to receive all contingencies together that has achieved the depth of co-presence in which the fullest happiness is possible.

This insight has roots in the existentialist tradition we examined in §5.2: Heidegger’s account of being-toward-death as the condition for authentic existence, and Sartre’s insistence on the radical contingency of all situations, both suggest that the most fundamental mode of being-in-the-world involves an openness to the full range of what can happen, including what is most unwanted. The GRB framework relocates this existentialist insight from the individual to the relational field: it is not merely the individual who must be open to the full range of contingency, but the relational field itself—and the relational field’s capacity for this openness is a measure of its depth and strength.

The double face of contingency. The same structure that makes the shared flower a source of relational happiness makes shared loss, grief, and trauma possible as sources of

relational depth. The relational field that is open to receiving all contingencies—beautiful and terrible alike—as relational events is stronger, more resilient, and ultimately more capable of the deep happiness that comes from full co-presence than the relational field that is open only to pleasant events. The capacity to share suffering is not opposed to the capacity for shared happiness; it is its condition.

The double face of contingency also illuminates the structure of relational resilience. When a painful contingent event—a loss, an illness, a shared failure—enters the relational field and is received as a relational event, it does not merely add pain to the field; it also, if the field is strong enough to bear it, deepens the field’s geometry. The holonomy accumulated through the shared traversal of a painful situation can be greater than the holonomy accumulated through a shared pleasant one: the co-presence required to bear loss together is more demanding, more exposing, more revelatory of the depth of the relational bond than the co-presence of shared delight. This is why the deepest intimacies are often forged not in moments of happiness but in moments of shared endurance—and why the happiness that follows from such endurance has a different quality, a different weight, than the happiness of shared flowers alone.

This observation points toward what we might call the **eudaimonics of relational resilience**: the idea that the capacity to receive bad contingencies together is not merely a useful feature of intimate relations but a constitutive dimension of their flourishing. A relational field that has only been tested by pleasant contingencies has not yet fully developed its capacity for the deepest happiness; it is in the traversal of difficult contingencies together—in the shared experience of what is hard, unwanted, and not chosen—that the relational field achieves the depth and strength that makes its highest happiness possible.

We will return to this theme in §5.13, where the practical cultivation of this capacity will be discussed. For now, having established both the structure of the contingent event’s descent into the relational field and the double face of that descent, we are ready to examine the dynamical consequences: how the entry of a contingent event—pleasant or painful—triggers the co-evolutionary dynamics of the relational system that constitute, in the GRB framework, the generative ground of happiness.

5.6. Co-evolution as Relational Dynamics

The preceding section established that a contingent event, when it enters the relational field through the constitutive act of sharing, becomes a relational event—an event whose significance belongs to the *between* rather than to either individual. But what happens next? What does the relational field *do* with the event it has received? The answer that the GRB framework proposes is: the relational field undergoes co-evolution. The two dynamical systems that compose the relational field—the two individual subjects, each with their own history, attunement, and dynamical structure—are perturbed by the event and respond to that perturbation together, in a way that produces changes in each that are irreducible to what either would have undergone alone.

This section develops the concept of relational co-evolution in three registers: philosophical, formal-physical, and neuroscientific. The three registers are not alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon but complementary levels of analysis—in the sense of Marr’s levels (Marr 1982)—each of which captures something that the others do not, and none of which is reducible to the others. Together, they constitute a multi-level account of how the relational field generates happiness through co-evolutionary dynamics.

5.6.1 The Philosophical Register: No Isolated Individual Dynamics

The philosophical core of the co-evolutionary account is a negative claim that must be stated with precision: **there are no fully isolated individual dynamics in an intimate relational system.** This is not the trivial claim that individuals influence each other—that is compatible with a picture on which each individual has their own dynamics and these dynamics are modified by external influences, including the other person. The claim is stronger: that the dynamics of each individual, within an intimate relational system, are *constitutively* shaped by the relational field, so that there is no baseline individual dynamic that exists independently of the relation and to which the individual would revert if the relation were removed.

This claim follows from the ontological framework established in §5.4. If the individual subject is constituted by and within the relational field, then the individual’s dynamical structure—their patterns of emotional response, their attentional habits, their modes of

making sense of the world—is itself a product of the relational field. The self that walks alongside the beloved, notices the flower, and feels the happiness of sharing it, is not a self that exists independently of this relation and happens to be walking alongside someone; it is a self whose very capacity for this kind of noticing and sharing has been shaped by the history of this relation. The individual dynamics are, in this sense, always already relational dynamics.

The positive claim follows from the negative: when a contingent event enters the relational field and the two individuals respond to it together, the response of each is not simply their individual response to an external stimulus. It is a response that is already shaped by the relational field—by the history of shared responses, the accumulated attunement, the joint habits of attention—and that further shapes the relational field through the new history it creates. The co-evolution triggered by the shared flower is not two individual evolutions happening in parallel; it is a single relational evolution that produces changes in each individual that are functions of the relational field as a whole, not of either individual's dynamics in isolation.

The irreducibility of relational co-evolution. The co-evolution triggered in a relational system by a contingent event is not the sum of two individual evolutions occurring in parallel. It is a single dynamical process at the level of the relational field, whose effects on each individual are functions of the field as a whole. There are no fully isolated individual dynamics in an intimate relational system: the individual dynamics are always already relational, and the co-evolutionary response to a contingent event is irreducible to any decomposition into individual components.

The happiness that arises from this co-evolutionary process is, on the philosophical account, the *felt signal* of the relational field's generative activity. It is the way in which the relational field's co-evolution presents itself to the individuals who participate in it—the phenomenal surface of a dynamical process that occurs at the level of the field. This is why the happiness of the shared flower feels different from any happiness that either

person could generate alone: it is the felt quality of a process that exceeds both of them, that is happening at a level they participate in but do not control, and that produces in each of them a sense of something coming from the between, from the shared field, rather than from within themselves.

5.6.2 The Formal-Physical Register: Coupled Dynamical Systems

The philosophical account of co-evolution can be given formal content by drawing on the theory of coupled dynamical systems—a branch of mathematics and theoretical physics that studies the behaviour of systems that are connected to and influence each other (Strogatz 2001; Kuramoto 1984). The formal account does not replace the philosophical account but gives it mathematical precision and connects it to a rich body of theoretical and empirical results.

Coupled Oscillators and the Emergence of New Attractors

Consider two dynamical systems, $\mathcal{S}_1$ and $\mathcal{S}_2$, each with their own state space and their own autonomous dynamics. In the absence of coupling, each system evolves according to its own equations of motion:

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}_1 = \mathbf{f}_1(\mathbf{x}_1) \quad (5.1)$$

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}_2 = \mathbf{f}_2(\mathbf{x}_2) \quad (5.2)$$

where $\mathbf{x}_i$ is the state vector of system i and $\mathbf{f}_i$ is its autonomous vector field. Each system, evolving independently, has its own attractors—its own stable states or stable cycles toward which it tends over time.

When the two systems are coupled—when each influences the other—the equations of motion become:

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}_1 = \mathbf{f}_1(\mathbf{x}_1) + \varepsilon \mathbf{g}_1(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2) \quad (5.3)$$

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}}_2 = \mathbf{f}_2(\mathbf{x}_2) + \varepsilon \mathbf{g}_2(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2) \quad (5.4)$$

where ε is the coupling strength and $\mathbf{g}_i$ is the coupling function that describes how system j influences system i . The coupled system is now a single dynamical system in the product

space $\mathcal{S}_1 \times \mathcal{S}_2$, with its own dynamics, its own attractors, and its own emergent behaviour.

The crucial mathematical fact is this: the attractors of the coupled system are generally *not* the attractors of the individual systems. Coupling produces new attractors—new stable states or stable cycles that exist in the product space but correspond to no attractor of either individual system. These new attractors are the formal representation of what the GRB framework calls relational co-evolution: they are the stable patterns of joint behaviour that the relational system generates through its coupling, patterns that neither individual would exhibit in isolation.

The shared flower, in this formal framework, functions as an external perturbation: a sudden change in the state of one or both systems that displaces the coupled system from its current trajectory and initiates a transient response. If the coupling is strong enough—if the relational field is deep enough—this perturbation is absorbed into the relational dynamics and processed jointly, producing a trajectory through the product space that is characteristic of the coupled system rather than of either individual. The happiness of the shared flower is, formally, the phenomenal correlate of this joint trajectory: the way in which the coupled system’s response to the perturbation presents itself to the individuals who constitute it.

Synchronisation and the Kuramoto Model

A particularly important class of coupled dynamical systems is the class of coupled oscillators: systems in which each individual component has a natural frequency of oscillation, and coupling produces synchronisation—the alignment of the individual oscillations into a common rhythm (Kuramoto 1984). The Kuramoto model provides the canonical mathematical treatment of this phenomenon:

$$\dot{\theta}_i = \omega_i + \frac{K}{N} \sum_{j=1}^N \sin(\theta_j - \theta_i) \quad (5.5)$$

where θ_i is the phase of oscillator i , ω_i is its natural frequency, K is the coupling strength, and N is the number of oscillators. When K exceeds a critical threshold K_c , the system undergoes a phase transition from incoherence to synchronisation: the individual oscilla-

tors, despite their different natural frequencies, lock into a common phase and frequency.

Applied to the relational system, the Kuramoto model captures something important about the phenomenology of shared happiness. The two individuals in an intimate relation are, in general, oscillating at different frequencies: different rhythms of attention, different emotional tempos, different cycles of engagement and withdrawal. The coupling produced by the relational field—through shared attention, shared activity, shared history—tends to synchronise these rhythms, producing a common relational rhythm that is not the rhythm of either individual but the rhythm of the coupled system.

The contingent event—the flower on the path—functions, in the Kuramoto framework, as a perturbation that temporarily increases the effective coupling strength: the shared attention to the flower aligns the two individuals’ attentional rhythms in a way that ordinary co-presence may not. This transient increase in coupling strength produces a transient increase in synchronisation, and it is this transient synchronisation—the moment of aligned attention, aligned affect, aligned presence—that constitutes, at the formal level, the co-evolutionary response to the contingent event. The happiness of the shared flower is, in part, the felt quality of this transient synchronisation: the sense of being, for a moment, in rhythm with the other in a way that feels effortless and complete.

Quantum Entanglement Structure and Non-Locality

A third formal framework illuminates a different aspect of relational co-evolution: the quantum-mechanical concept of entanglement (Einstein et al. 1935). We emphasise at the outset—as this paper’s commitment to intellectual honesty requires—that the following is a **structural isomorphism** rather than a literal physical claim. We are not asserting that intimate relations involve quantum-mechanical processes in any literal sense; we are asserting that the mathematical structure of quantum entanglement provides a precise and illuminating analogy for certain features of relational co-evolution that classical dynamical systems theory does not fully capture.

A quantum system consisting of two subsystems is said to be entangled if its state cannot be written as a product of the states of the individual subsystems:

$$|\Psi\rangle \neq |\psi_1\rangle \otimes |\psi_2\rangle \quad (5.6)$$

In an entangled state, the two subsystems are correlated in a way that is not reducible to the properties of either subsystem considered independently: a measurement on one subsystem immediately affects the probabilities of measurement outcomes on the other, regardless of the spatial separation between them. The correlations are, in this sense, non-local: they are properties of the joint state rather than of either subsystem.

The structural analogy with relational co-evolution is precise. The relational field, on the GRB account, is a joint state that cannot be decomposed into the product of two individual states: the properties of the relational field are not reducible to the properties of either individual, and changes in one individual's state are immediately reflected in the state of the field as a whole, not because of any causal influence transmitted between individuals but because the individuals are, in their relational existence, parts of a joint state. The non-locality of quantum entanglement is the formal analogue of the *between's* non-reducibility to either of the individuals who constitute it.

This analogy is philosophically significant because it captures the sense in which the happiness of the shared flower is genuinely non-local: it does not reside in either person but in the relational field that both participate in, and it is experienced by each not as a property of themselves but as a property of the field in which they are jointly constituted. The happiness comes from the between; it is felt *as coming from the between*; and this phenomenological fact corresponds, at the formal level, to the non-local character of the joint relational state.

We note, for the sake of the honest account that this paper's methodology requires, that the entanglement analogy faces the same limitation that [Paper XIII](#) noted in its application of quantum dynamical systems to the analysis of trust (Huang 2026): the analogy illuminates the structure of the phenomenon but does not license any claims about the underlying physical implementation. The relational field is not a quantum system; its non-locality is not the non-locality of quantum mechanics. It is a structural non-locality—an irreducibility of the field to its parts—that the mathematical language of entanglement expresses with precision that ordinary language does not.

5.6.3 The Neuroscientific Register: Inter-Brain Synchrony and Embodied Resonance

The philosophical and formal accounts of relational co-evolution are complemented, at the empirical level, by a growing body of neuroscientific and biological research on the neural and physiological correlates of shared experience. This research does not reduce the philosophical phenomenon to its neural correlates—the relationship between the formal and the physical, and between the physical and the phenomenal, remains one of the deepest unsolved problems in philosophy of mind—but it provides empirical grounding for the claim that relational co-evolution is a real, measurable phenomenon that occurs at multiple levels of the organism.

Inter-Brain Synchrony: EEG, MEG, and Hyperscanning

The most direct neural evidence for relational co-evolution comes from hyperscanning research: studies in which the neural activity of two or more individuals is measured simultaneously, allowing the detection of inter-brain synchrony—the alignment of neural oscillations across brains (Hasson et al. 2012; Dikker et al. 2017).

Electroencephalography (EEG) hyperscanning provides the highest temporal resolution: it can detect synchrony at the millisecond timescale, capturing the rapid dynamics of shared attention, joint action, and co-present affect that are most directly relevant to the phenomenology of the shared flower. EEG studies of dyadic interaction have documented inter-brain synchrony in multiple frequency bands—including theta (4–8 Hz), alpha (8–12 Hz), and gamma (30–80 Hz)—during joint attention, cooperative task performance, and face-to-face communication (Liu et al. 2023). The synchrony is not merely a consequence of both brains processing the same external stimulus; it reflects genuine coupling between the two neural systems, as evidenced by the fact that it exceeds the synchrony observed when two individuals are presented with the same stimulus independently.

Magnetoencephalography (MEG) offers complementary advantages: superior spatial resolution compared to EEG (due to the absence of volume conduction distortion), and sensitivity to deep cortical sources that EEG cannot easily detect. MEG hyperscanning is technically more demanding than EEG hyperscanning—it requires magnetically shielded rooms and specialised infrastructure—but it provides a more complete picture of

the spatial distribution of inter-brain synchrony, allowing the identification of the specific cortical networks involved in relational co-evolution.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) contributes the highest spatial resolution: it can localise the neural correlates of shared experience to specific brain regions with millimetre precision, identifying the prefrontal, temporal, and limbic structures that are differentially engaged during shared versus individual experience (Hasson et al. 2012). While fMRI's temporal resolution is too low to capture the rapid dynamics of moment-to-moment co-evolution, its spatial resolution makes it indispensable for understanding the neural architecture of the relational field.

Functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS) offers a crucial practical advantage: it can be used in naturalistic environments, without the rigid constraints of MRI or MEG scanners, allowing the measurement of neural co-evolution during real-world relational interactions. fNIRS hyperscanning studies have documented inter-brain synchrony during cooperative tasks, joint music-making, and face-to-face conversation in settings that much more closely approximate the natural conditions of intimate relational life (Hasson et al. 2012).

Together, these neuroimaging modalities provide convergent evidence for the neural reality of relational co-evolution. When two people share a contingent event—when they attend jointly to the flower on the path, or sit together in the wordless co-presence of relational flow—their brains are not processing the experience independently; they are coupled systems whose neural dynamics are synchronised in ways that reflect and constitute the shared experience. The inter-brain synchrony is the neural correlate of the *between*: the physical instantiation, at the level of neural dynamics, of the relational field's co-evolutionary activity.

Embodied Resonance and the Mirror System

Inter-brain synchrony is not confined to the cortical level; it has embodied correlates that extend throughout the organism. The discovery of mirror neurons—neurons that fire both when an organism performs an action and when it observes the same action performed by another—has provided a neural mechanism for what Merleau-Ponty described as intercorporeality: the pre-personal, pre-cognitive resonance between embodied

subjects that constitutes the ground of shared experience (Mukamel et al. 2010).

The mirror system is not merely a mechanism for imitation or action understanding; it is the neural substrate of embodied resonance—the way in which the other’s bodily states, expressions, and actions are directly registered in one’s own body, not as representations of the other’s states but as activations of one’s own motor and emotional systems. When the beloved is moved by the flower, the lover’s mirror system registers this movement not as an observation of an external event but as a resonance within the lover’s own embodied being. The shared emotion is not communicated from one person to another; it arises, simultaneously and through mutual embodied resonance, in both.

This embodied resonance is the neural and phenomenological correlate of what the formal framework describes as coupling: the mutual influence of two dynamical systems that produces co-evolutionary dynamics in the product space. The coupling function $\mathbf{g}_i(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2)$ in the formal account is, at the neural level, implemented by the mirror system and the broader embodied resonance mechanisms; and the co-evolutionary trajectory through the product space is, at the phenomenological level, the shared emotional experience that arises from this mutual embodied activation.

Co-regulation and the Neurobiology of Attachment

A third line of neuroscientific evidence for relational co-evolution comes from the study of physiological co-regulation: the finding that intimate partners mutually regulate each other’s physiological states, including heart rate, cortisol levels, respiratory rhythm, and autonomic nervous system tone (Feldman 2007; Porges 2011).

Co-regulation is most dramatically documented in the parent-infant dyad, where the caregiver’s physiological state continuously influences the infant’s—and, through the infant’s responsive signals, is itself influenced by the infant’s state (Feldman 2007). But co-regulation extends throughout the lifespan and is robustly documented in adult intimate relationships: partners synchronise their heart rate variability during shared emotional experiences, their cortisol levels covary in response to shared stressors, and their autonomic regulation is mutually dependent in ways that make each partner’s physiological well-being genuinely dependent on the other’s physiological state.

This physiological co-regulation is not a mere consequence of shared circumstances—both partners being exposed to the same environmental conditions—but a genuine coupling of two biological systems, mediated by the full range of interpersonal signals (vocal prosody, facial expression, touch, gaze, bodily posture) that constitute the embodied communication channel of an intimate relation. The two partners are, in a physiologically precise sense, coupled dynamical systems: each partner’s physiological dynamics are constitutively shaped by the other’s, so that the system they compose together has properties—including regulatory capacities and resilience—that neither possesses alone.

The happiness of the shared flower has, on this account, a physiological dimension that is irreducible to either partner’s individual physiological state: it is the felt quality of a moment of successful co-regulation, a moment in which the two physiological systems are in a particularly harmonious alignment—a joint homeostatic state, reached through the mutual coupling of embodied dynamics, that neither could achieve alone.

Multi-level co-evolution. Relational co-evolution is not a metaphor or a philosophical abstraction. It is a real, multi-level process that occurs simultaneously at the level of conscious experience (the phenomenology of shared happiness), neural dynamics (inter-brain synchrony in EEG, MEG, fMRI, and fNIRS), embodied resonance (the mirror system and intercorporeal activation), and physiological regulation (heart rate, cortisol, and autonomic co-regulation). These levels are not alternative descriptions but genuinely distinct levels of the same phenomenon, each capturing something the others do not, and together constituting the full structure of relational co-evolution.

The multi-level character of relational co-evolution is itself philosophically significant. It means that the happiness of the shared flower is not a purely mental event, not a purely neural event, not a purely physiological event, but an event that occurs at all of these levels simultaneously and that can only be fully understood by attending to all of them. This is consistent with the GRB framework’s commitment to a non-reductive, multi-register analysis of relational phenomena: the formal, the neural, the embodied, and the

phenomenological are all genuine levels of the relational field's co-evolutionary activity, and the philosophy of relational happiness must be answerable to all of them.

5.7. Developmental Dynamics under Relational Coupling

The previous section established that the relational field is a coupled dynamical system whose co-evolutionary response to contingent events is real, multi-level, and irreducible to the sum of individual dynamics. But the account so far has been primarily synchronic: it has described what happens at a given moment when a contingent event enters the relational field. The deeper question is diachronic: how does the relational system *develop* over time? How do repeated contingent events—flowers and griefs, shared moments of beauty and shared moments of difficulty—accumulate into the trajectory of a relational life? What is the geometry of this trajectory, and how does it relate to the individual dynamics of the two people who compose the relational system?

This section addresses these diachronic questions in five movements, culminating in a formal account of event-driven relational dynamics drawn from the biology of spiking neural networks (SNN). The account is both a formal contribution—it provides a precise model of how contingent events trigger structural change in the relational system—and a philosophical one: it illuminates the temporal structure of relational flourishing in a way that connects the micro-level dynamics of shared moments to the macro-level trajectory of a shared life.

5.7.1 The Problem of the Relational Phase Space

To speak of the *development* of a relational system is to speak of its trajectory through a space of possible states. But what is the state space of a relational system? This question is more subtle than it appears, because the state space of the coupled system is not simply the Cartesian product of the state spaces of the two individuals.

Let $\mathcal{X}_1$ and $\mathcal{X}_2$ be the state spaces of the two individual dynamical systems—the spaces of all possible states of each individual, including their emotional states, attentional orientations, cognitive sets, and bodily dispositions. The state space of the coupled system is, at first approximation, the product space $\mathcal{X}_1 \times \mathcal{X}_2$. But this approximation

misses something essential: the relational field has its own degrees of freedom—the history of shared events, the accumulated attunement, the quality of the *between*—that are not reducible to the current states of the two individuals. The full state space of the relational system must include these relational degrees of freedom:

$$\mathcal{X}_{\text{rel}} = \mathcal{X}_1 \times \mathcal{X}_2 \times \mathcal{R} \quad (5.7)$$

where $\mathcal{R}$ is the space of relational states—the space of all possible configurations of the *between*, including the history of shared events, the current quality of attunement, and the geometry of the relational field as shaped by past co-evolution. The dimension of $\mathcal{R}$ is, in general, much larger than the dimensions of $\mathcal{X}_1$ and $\mathcal{X}_2$: the relational field carries more information than either individual, because it carries the history of their interactions as well as their current states.

This extended state space is the proper arena for describing relational development. The trajectory of a relational system through $\mathcal{X}_{\text{rel}}$ is the trajectory of the couple’s shared life: each point on the trajectory corresponds to a moment in that life, with its particular configuration of individual states and relational states, and the trajectory as a whole is the geometric realisation of the shared life in the space of possible relational configurations.

5.7.2 The Emergence and Stability of Shared Attractors

Within this extended phase space, the co-evolutionary dynamics of the relational system produce attractors that are genuinely relational—attractors that exist in $\mathcal{X}_{\text{rel}}$ but correspond to no attractor in either $\mathcal{X}_1$ or $\mathcal{X}_2$ alone. These shared attractors are the formal representation of what, in phenomenological terms, we call relational modes: the characteristic ways of being together that an intimate relation develops over time—the particular rhythm of shared attention, the characteristic register of shared affect, the habitual mode of joint response to contingent events.

A shared attractor is, formally, a region of $\mathcal{X}_{\text{rel}}$ toward which the relational dynamics tend from a range of initial conditions. Its basin of attraction—the set of initial states from which the system converges to the attractor—is a measure of the attractor’s stability: a large basin indicates a robust relational mode that is resilient to perturbation, while

a small basin indicates a fragile mode that is easily displaced by contingent events or internal fluctuations.

The development of a relational system can be described, in these terms, as the progressive emergence and stabilisation of shared attractors. Early in a relation, the coupled dynamics are highly sensitive to initial conditions and to contingent events: small perturbations produce large divergences, and the system has not yet developed the stable relational modes that characterise a mature intimate relation. Over time, through repeated co-evolutionary responses to contingent events, shared attractors emerge and their basins of attraction expand: the relational system becomes more stable, more predictable in its characteristic modes, more resilient to perturbation.

This developmental trajectory is the formal correlate of what is experienced, from within the relation, as the deepening of intimacy: the sense that the relation has developed its own characteristic ways of being together, that two people have learned each other in a way that makes their joint responses to contingent events feel natural and effortless, that the *between* has acquired a richness and depth that it did not have at the beginning. The emergence of shared attractors is the dynamical ground of this experienced deepening.

Shared attractors as relational achievements. The development of a relational system consists, in part, in the emergence and stabilisation of shared attractors in the relational phase space $\mathcal{X}_{\text{rel}}$. These attractors are genuine relational achievements: they do not exist in the state space of either individual and could not have been reached by either individual's dynamics alone. The deepening of intimacy, experienced phenomenologically as the growth of shared modes and mutual attunement, corresponds, at the dynamical level, to the expansion of the basins of attraction of these shared attractors.

5.7.3 The Nesting of Individual and Relational Dynamics

A question that the dynamical account must address is the relationship between individual and relational dynamics: if the relational field has its own attractors, its own trajectory, its own degrees of freedom, what becomes of the individual? Is the individual dissolved into the relational field, their dynamics entirely subsumed by the coupled dynamics?

The answer, as anticipated in §5.4, is no—but the relationship is more subtle than simple parallel coexistence. The individual dynamics and the relational dynamics are *nested*: the individual dynamics are embedded within and shaped by the relational dynamics, but they retain a genuine autonomy within that embedding. This nesting can be made precise in the language of dynamical systems theory through the concept of *slaving*: in a coupled system with multiple timescales, the fast variables are “slaved” to the slow variables, in the sense that they rapidly relax to a manifold determined by the slow variables (Strogatz 2001).

In the relational system, the relational degrees of freedom $\mathcal{R}$ —the accumulated history, the attractor landscape, the quality of attunement—change slowly relative to the rapid fluctuations of individual state. The individual dynamics $\mathcal{X}_1$ and $\mathcal{X}_2$ are, in this sense, slaved to the relational dynamics: they evolve rapidly within a landscape that is shaped and continuously reshaped by the slower evolution of the relational field. The individual dynamics are not eliminated by this nesting; they are the fast, fine-grained activity that occurs within the slow, coarse-grained structure of the relational field.

This nesting has several important consequences. First, it means that the individual retains genuine dynamical autonomy within the relational field: the fast fluctuations of individual state are not fully determined by the relational field, and the individual’s responses to contingent events retain an element of genuine particularity—a specificity of response that is not simply the average of the relational field’s response. Second, it means that the relational field is genuinely constraining: the individual dynamics do not unfold in a vacuum but within a landscape shaped by the relational history, and this landscape channels the individual dynamics in directions that are consistent with the relational attractor structure. Third, it means that the individual dynamics continuously feed back into the relational dynamics: the fast fluctuations of individual state are integrated, over

time, into the slow evolution of the relational field, so that the individual's particular responses to contingent events gradually reshape the relational landscape that constrains future responses.

5.7.4 The Time-Evolution of Coupling Strength

The coupling strength ε in the formal model of §5.6.2 is not a fixed parameter but a dynamic variable: it changes over time in response to the history of the relational system and to the contingent events that enter it. Understanding the time-evolution of coupling strength is essential for understanding the developmental trajectory of the relational system and the conditions under which relational happiness is possible.

Three mechanisms govern the time-evolution of coupling strength:

Baseline coupling through sustained co-presence. The ordinary daily co-presence of an intimate couple—the sharing of space, time, attention, and activity—produces a sustained baseline level of coupling that is the ground condition of relational co-evolution. This baseline coupling is not dramatic; it is the quiet, continuous mutual influence of two people who live together, whose rhythms of sleep and waking, eating and working, are attuned to each other's. But it is real and dynamically significant: it maintains the relational system in a regime of moderate coupling from which it can respond to contingent events, and it gradually strengthens the shared attractors that constitute the relational landscape.

Event-driven coupling spikes. Contingent events—flowers on the path, shared griefs, moments of surprise or delight—produce transient spikes in coupling strength. In the formal model, a contingent event e occurring at time t_e produces a transient increase in ε :

$$\varepsilon(t) = \varepsilon_0 + \sum_k \Delta\varepsilon_k \cdot h(t - t_k) \quad (5.8)$$

where ε_0 is the baseline coupling, $\Delta\varepsilon_k$ is the magnitude of the coupling increase produced by event k , and $h(t)$ is a response kernel that captures the temporal profile of the coupling increase—typically a rapid rise followed by a slower decay. The happiness of the shared

flower corresponds, in this model, to the transient state of enhanced coupling: the moment in which the relational system is operating in a regime of stronger-than-baseline coupling, producing more intense co-evolutionary dynamics and a richer shared attractor structure.

Long-term structural modification. Some contingent events—particularly those that are intense, unexpected, or deeply significant—produce not merely transient coupling increases but permanent structural modifications of the relational landscape. These events reshape the attractor structure of the relational field in ways that persist long after the event itself has passed: they create new shared attractors, expand the basins of existing attractors, or, in cases of relational crisis, contract or destroy attractor basins. This permanent structural modification is the dynamical correlate of what is experienced as a turning point in a relation—a moment after which the relation is, in some fundamental sense, different from what it was before.

5.7.5 Event-Driven Relational Dynamics: The SNN Analogy

The most powerful formal model for understanding event-driven structural modification in dynamical systems is the spiking neural network (SNN)—a class of computational models inspired by the biology of neural circuits, in which information is processed through discrete, temporally precise events (spikes) rather than through continuous rate codes (Maass 1997; Gerstner et al. 1996). The SNN model provides a precise and biologically grounded analogy for the way in which contingent events trigger structural change in the relational system.

The SNN as a Biological Dynamical System

In a biological neural network, individual neurons integrate synaptic inputs over time and generate an action potential (spike) when their membrane potential exceeds a threshold. The spike propagates along the axon and triggers the release of neurotransmitters at synaptic terminals, which in turn influence the membrane potentials of postsynaptic neurons. The network’s behaviour is thus determined by the pattern of spikes—their timing, their spatial distribution across the network, and the synaptic weights that determine the influence of each spike on its targets.

The crucial property of SNNs that motivates the relational analogy is *spike-timing depen-*

dent plasticity (STDP): the synaptic weights of the network are modified by experience, and the direction and magnitude of this modification depend on the precise temporal relationship between pre- and postsynaptic spikes (Bi and Poo 1998). Specifically:

$$\Delta w_{ij} = \begin{cases} A_+ \exp\left(-\frac{t_{\text{post}} - t_{\text{pre}}}{\tau_+}\right) & \text{if } t_{\text{post}} > t_{\text{pre}} \\ -A_- \exp\left(-\frac{t_{\text{pre}} - t_{\text{post}}}{\tau_-}\right) & \text{if } t_{\text{post}} < t_{\text{pre}} \end{cases} \quad (5.9)$$

where Δw_{ij} is the change in synaptic weight from neuron j to neuron i , t_{pre} and t_{post} are the times of the pre- and postsynaptic spikes, A_+ and A_- are the magnitudes of potentiation and depression, and τ_+ and τ_- are the time constants of the learning windows. The key biological insight is that the causal order of spikes matters: if the presynaptic neuron fires before the postsynaptic neuron (which suggests that the presynaptic neuron contributed to causing the postsynaptic spike), the synapse is strengthened; if the order is reversed, the synapse is weakened.

STDP is Hebbian learning at millisecond precision: it implements, at the neural level, the principle that “neurons that fire together, wire together”—but with the crucial temporal specificity that distinguishes genuine causal coupling from mere coincidence.

The Relational Analogy

The SNN model maps onto the relational system with a precision that is, we believe, philosophically illuminating. The mapping proceeds as follows:

The two individuals as coupled neural populations. Each person in the relational system corresponds to a population of neurons (or, at the systems level, to a dynamical system with SNN-like properties): a complex, high-dimensional system that integrates inputs over time, generates event-like responses (emotional reactions, attentional shifts, affective spikes), and transmits these responses to the other system through the coupling of the relational field.

The relational field as the synaptic network. The coupling between the two individual systems is mediated by the relational field—the *between* with its accumulated history,

its attunement, its shared attractor structure. This coupling corresponds, in the SNN analogy, to the synaptic network that connects the two neural populations: a structured set of connection weights that determines how the activity of one population influences the other, and that is itself modified by experience through the STDP-like mechanism of relational co-evolution.

Contingent events as relational spikes. A contingent event—the flower on the path, the unexpected news, the moment of shared laughter—corresponds to a spike: a discrete, temporally localised event that perturbs the state of the relational system and propagates through the coupling to affect both individuals. The spike is not a gradual influence but a sudden perturbation that crosses a threshold and initiates a rapid, discrete response.

The threshold character of relational spikes is philosophically significant. Not every contingent occurrence that takes place in the vicinity of the relational field enters that field as a relational event; only those that are sufficiently salient, sufficiently surprising, or sufficiently resonant with the current state of the relational field cross the threshold of joint attention and become relational spikes. This threshold structure explains why the same environmental event—a flower on the same path—can enter the relational field as a vivid relational event on one occasion and pass unnoticed on another: the threshold depends on the current state of the relational system, including the quality of co-present attention and the degree of mutual attunement.

STDP as relational structural modification. The most important element of the analogy is the mapping between STDP and the long-term structural modification of the relational field by contingent events. In the SNN, STDP modifies synaptic weights in a way that depends on the precise temporal relationship between spikes: spikes that occur in causal sequence strengthen the connections between the neurons that generated them, while spikes that occur in anti-causal sequence weaken those connections. In the relational system, a contingent event that is shared in a timely fashion—that enters the relational field through an act of sharing that occurs close in time to the event itself—produces a stronger structural modification of the relational field than an event that is shared with delay.

This temporal dependence of relational STDP provides a formal account of the phe-

nomenological observation noted in §5.5.1: the happiness of the shared flower depends crucially on the timeliness of the sharing. The flower that is shared immediately—“look!”—has a stronger co-evolutionary effect on the relational field than the flower that is mentioned later that evening: “oh, I saw the most beautiful flower today.” The later mention is still a form of sharing, and it still enters the relational field as a relational event; but the temporal gap between the event and the sharing reduces the magnitude of the relational STDP effect, producing a weaker structural modification of the relational landscape.

Formally, let t_e be the time of the contingent event and t_s be the time of the sharing act. The magnitude of the structural modification is:

$$\Delta\mathcal{R} \propto A \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{t_s - t_e}{\tau_{\text{rel}}}\right) \quad (5.10)$$

where τ_{rel} is the time constant of relational STDP—the characteristic timescale over which the sharing must occur for the contingent event to produce its maximal co-evolutionary effect. Events shared within this window produce strong structural modification; events shared outside it produce progressively weaker modification; events that are never shared produce no structural modification of the relational field, however significant they may be for the individual who experienced them.

Relational STDP and the timeliness of sharing. The structural modification of the relational field produced by a contingent event depends on the temporal proximity of the sharing act to the event itself. Events shared immediately produce stronger co-evolutionary effects—stronger modifications of the relational attractor landscape—than events shared with delay. This relational STDP principle provides a formal account of the phenomenological observation that the happiness of the shared flower depends on the timeliness of the sharing, and it implies a practical principle: the cultivation of relational happiness requires the development of habits of timely sharing, of the kind of co-present attentiveness that makes immediate sharing possible.

The Threshold Mechanism and Relational Readiness

The SNN analogy also illuminates the threshold mechanism introduced in §5.5.3. In the SNN, a neuron generates a spike only when its membrane potential exceeds a threshold: subthreshold inputs accumulate but do not produce a discrete response, while suprathreshold inputs trigger the rapid, all-or-nothing response of the action potential. This threshold mechanism is essential to the SNN's information-processing properties: it ensures that only sufficiently strong or sufficiently coincident inputs produce a discrete response, filtering out weak or uncorrelated signals.

In the relational system, the threshold for the generation of a relational spike—for the entry of a contingent event into the relational field as a relational event—is determined by the current state of the relational field. A field in a state of high co-present attunement has a lower threshold: smaller and more subtle contingent events can enter the field as relational spikes. A field in a state of low attunement, distraction, or emotional disconnection has a higher threshold: only large, dramatic, or emotionally intense events can penetrate the threshold and enter the field as relational spikes.

This threshold modulation by relational state explains a familiar phenomenological observation: the same environment—the same path, the same flowers, the same afternoon light—feels more vivid, more alive, more generative of shared happiness when one is in a state of genuine co-present attunement with a beloved person than when one is distracted, preoccupied, or emotionally absent. The environment has not changed; the threshold has changed. The practices of relational attentiveness that §5.13 will discuss are, in part, practices of threshold modulation: they cultivate the state of co-present attunement that lowers the threshold for relational spikes and thereby increases the relational field's sensitivity to contingent events.

From Spikes to Trajectories: The Cumulative Structure of Relational Development

The SNN analogy, applied to the relational system, yields a picture of relational development as the cumulative effect of a lifetime of relational spikes. Each contingent event that enters the relational field as a relational spike produces a small structural modification of the relational landscape—a tiny shift in the attractor structure, a small change in the coupling weights, a modest expansion or contraction of a basin of attraction. Over the

course of a shared life, these small modifications accumulate into the rich, complex relational landscape of a mature intimate relation: its characteristic modes of joint attention, its habitual registers of shared affect, its resilience in the face of difficulty, its capacity for the deepest forms of co-present happiness.

This cumulative structure is the dynamical correlate of what [Paper IX](#) described in terms of geometric phase and holonomy (Huang 2025b): the spiral structure of relational development, in which each traversal of the relational cycle returns not to the starting point but to a new point carrying the accumulated phase of the journey. The relational STDP mechanism provides the micro-level account of how this accumulation occurs: each shared contingent event produces a small modification of the relational landscape, and the integral of these modifications over time is the holonomy of the relational trajectory—the total accumulated phase that constitutes the spiral of a shared life.

The happiness that arises in the mature intimate relation—the deep, quiet happiness of two people who have shared a long history of contingent events, who have developed the shared attractor landscape of a life together, whose coupling is strong and whose threshold is low—is not the same as the happiness of the early relation, with its dramatic spikes and its rapidly changing landscape. It is a happiness of depth rather than of intensity: the happiness of a relational system that has accumulated, through the patient work of a lifetime of sharing, a rich and stable landscape of shared attractors, a deep and resilient coupling, a *between* that is dense with the history of everything that has been received together.

The cumulative structure of relational happiness. The happiness of a mature intimate relation is not the sum of individual moments of shared happiness but the cumulative product of a lifetime of relational STDP: the rich attractor landscape that emerges from the structural modifications produced by a lifetime of shared contingent events. This cumulative happiness has a different character from the happiness of individual shared moments—it is quieter, deeper, more stable, and more resilient—and it constitutes the fullest realisation of what the GRB framework calls relational *eudaimonia*: the flourishing of a relational system that has developed, through sustained co-evolution, the depth and

stability of a genuinely shared life.

With this formal account of relational developmental dynamics in place, we are ready to examine how these dynamics can be studied empirically. The next section proposes a research methodology for testing the claims of the GRB account—a methodology that must be as attentive to the distinctive ethical challenges of relational research as it is to the formal requirements of empirical science.

5.8. Empirical Methodology: Towards a Science of Relational Co-evolution

The preceding sections have developed the GRB account of relational happiness at the philosophical, formal, and neuroscientific levels. But a multi-level account of this kind carries an obligation that purely philosophical accounts can avoid: it must be answerable to empirical evidence. If relational co-evolution is a real, multi-level phenomenon—if the shared flower genuinely produces inter-brain synchrony, physiological co-regulation, and structural modification of the relational attractor landscape—then these claims must be testable, and the conditions under which they would be falsified must be specifiable.

This section proposes an empirical research programme for testing the central claims of the GRB account. The programme is organised around two primary verification targets: the descent of the contingent event into the relational field as a genuinely relational event (rather than two parallel individual events), and the co-evolutionary dynamics that follow from this descent (including the structural modification predicted by the relational STDP model). We then address the distinctive ethical challenges of relational research and the biases that must be carefully managed if the research is to yield reliable conclusions.

5.8.1 Verification Target One: The Descent of the Contingent Event

The first and most fundamental empirical claim of the GRB account is that a contingent event, when shared between two people in a state of intimate co-presence, enters the relational field as a genuinely relational event—an event that is processed differently,

and that produces different neural and physiological effects, from the same event experienced by two individuals independently. This claim can be made empirically precise and subjected to experimental test.

Hyperscanning Paradigms

The primary tool for testing this claim is dyadic hyperscanning: the simultaneous measurement of neural activity in two individuals while they engage in a shared experience (Hasson et al. 2012; Dikker et al. 2017). The core experimental design is a within-dyad comparison between two conditions:

- **Joint condition:** Two partners experience a contingent stimulus together—in co-present, face-to-face, or side-by-side interaction—and are free to share their response through gaze, touch, or verbal communication.
- **Independent condition:** The same two partners experience the same contingent stimulus separately, without knowledge that the other is also experiencing it, and without the possibility of sharing.

The prediction of the GRB account is that the joint condition will produce significantly greater inter-brain synchrony than the independent condition, and that this synchrony will be specifically associated with the act of sharing rather than with the co-occurrence of the stimulus. This prediction can be tested at multiple neural levels:

EEG hyperscanning measures inter-brain phase synchrony (IBS) in specific frequency bands—theta, alpha, beta, and gamma—during the joint and independent conditions. The GRB account predicts that the act of sharing will produce a transient spike in IBS, corresponding to the relational spike of the formal model, and that this IBS spike will be greater in dyads with higher relational quality (measured by established instruments such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale or the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire) than in dyads with lower relational quality. The temporal precision of EEG allows the detection of IBS dynamics at the millisecond timescale, enabling the testing of the relational STDP prediction: that IBS spikes produced by timely sharing (sharing that occurs close in time to the contingent event) will be larger and more sustained than IBS spikes produced by delayed sharing.

MEG hyperscanning provides complementary spatial information, identifying the cortical networks—particularly the mentalising network (medial prefrontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, posterior superior temporal sulcus) and the mirror system (inferior frontal gyrus, inferior parietal lobule)—that are specifically engaged during the joint condition relative to the independent condition. The GRB account predicts that the mentalising network will be more strongly engaged during the act of sharing than during the independent processing of the same stimulus, reflecting the relational field’s constitution of the shared object.

fMRI hyperscanning, while limited in temporal resolution, provides the spatial precision to identify subcortical and deep cortical structures—amygdala, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex—that are associated with shared affect and relational bonding. The GRB account predicts that the neural correlates of the shared emotional response will be distributed differently in the joint and independent conditions: more bilateral, more symmetric, and more strongly correlated between partners in the joint condition, reflecting the relational character of the shared event.

fNIRS hyperscanning is particularly important for the ecological validity of the research programme, since it can be deployed in naturalistic environments. A field study using fNIRS hyperscanning could test the GRB account in conditions that more closely approximate the actual phenomenology of shared contingent events: couples walking in a natural environment, encountering flowers, birds, or other contingent stimuli, with fNIRS measuring inter-brain synchrony in real time. This naturalistic paradigm avoids the artificial constraints of the laboratory while retaining the rigour of physiological measurement.

Physiological Synchrony Measurement

Complementing the neural measures, physiological synchrony measurements provide additional evidence for the relational character of the shared event at the bodily level. Heart rate variability (HRV) synchrony, skin conductance response (SCR) cross-correlation, and respiratory entrainment between partners during the joint versus independent conditions test the prediction that the shared event produces greater physiological coupling than the independent event.

Of particular interest is the *temporal dynamics* of physiological synchrony: the GRB

account predicts that physiological synchrony will spike at the moment of sharing (corresponding to the relational spike of the formal model) and then decay at a rate that reflects the coupling time constant τ_{rel} of the relational system. Measuring the rise and decay profile of physiological synchrony across dyads with different levels of relational depth allows an empirical estimate of τ_{rel} —a key parameter of the formal model.

Behavioural Coding

Behavioural measures complement the neural and physiological measures by providing evidence for joint attention—the threshold condition for the relational spike identified in §5.5.3. Eye-tracking in both partners allows the measurement of gaze synchrony: the degree to which the two partners’ gaze trajectories are aligned during the shared experience. Micro-expression coding from high-speed video captures the rapid affective responses that constitute embodied resonance. And the temporal structure of the sharing act itself—the latency between the contingent event and the sharing, the mode of sharing (gaze, touch, vocalisation), and the partner’s response to the sharing—can be coded from video and used to test the relational STDP prediction about the timeliness of sharing.

5.8.2 Verification Target Two: Co-evolutionary Dynamics and Structural Modification

The second verification target is more demanding and requires longitudinal methodology: the claim that repeated shared contingent events produce cumulative structural modification of the relational attractor landscape, consistent with the relational STDP model.

Longitudinal Dyadic Studies

A longitudinal cohort study tracking intimate dyads over an extended period—ideally three to five years—would allow the measurement of changes in relational quality, inter-brain synchrony, and physiological co-regulation as a function of the frequency and quality of shared contingent events. The key predictions of the GRB account are:

1. Dyads with higher rates of timely sharing of contingent events will show greater increases in inter-brain synchrony, physiological co-regulation, and relational quality

over the longitudinal period, consistent with the cumulative structural modification predicted by the relational STDP model.

2. The relationship between shared contingent events and relational quality will be mediated by inter-brain synchrony: the neural co-evolution triggered by shared events will be the mechanism through which events translate into relational structural modification.
3. The time constant τ_{rel} estimated from the synchrony dynamics in Verification Target One will predict the rate of structural modification in the longitudinal study: dyads for whom τ_{rel} is larger will show slower accumulation of relational modifications and will require more sustained sharing over longer periods to achieve equivalent structural change.

Coupling-Model Fitting

The formal model of relational dynamics developed in §5.7—the coupled dynamical systems model with STDP-like structural modification—can be fit to longitudinal dyadic data using state-space modelling techniques. The model parameters (baseline coupling ε_0 , event-driven coupling increment $\Delta\varepsilon$, STDP time constant τ_{rel} , attractor landscape parameters) can be estimated from the data, and the model’s predictions for future relational trajectories can be tested against observed outcomes.

A key test of the model is whether the estimated attractor landscape predicts relational resilience: do dyads with more stable shared attractors (wider basins of attraction) show greater resilience to relational crises, consistent with the formal account of attractor stability? And do dyads that undergo relational crises show the predicted contraction of attractor basins, followed by recovery if the crisis is successfully navigated?

5.8.3 Research Ethics

Research on intimate relational dynamics raises distinctive ethical challenges that are not adequately addressed by the standard frameworks of individual research ethics. These challenges must be confronted directly, not merely noted.

Relational informed consent. Standard informed consent procedures treat each individual as an independent research participant who can consent to or withdraw from the research independently. But intimate relational research treats the dyad as the unit of analysis, and this creates ethical complications that individual consent does not address. If one partner withdraws consent mid-study, the data of the other partner may be compromised or rendered uninterpretable, and the withdrawal of one partner may have consequences for the other's continued participation. A relational ethics of research consent would require dyadic consent procedures—procedures in which both partners consent jointly, and in which the implications of individual withdrawal for the partner's data and participation are explicitly discussed and agreed upon in advance.

Moreover, the act of participation in relational research is itself a relational event: it may affect the relational dynamics of the dyad in ways that are not predictable in advance. Couples who participate in research on their shared emotional responses, their physiological synchrony, or their attractor landscapes are gaining a kind of reflexive knowledge of their relational dynamics that may itself modify those dynamics. This observer effect—the modification of the relational system by the act of observing it—is not merely a methodological nuisance but an ethical concern: participants have a right to be informed of the possibility that participation may change the very relational dynamics they are there to observe.

Protection of intimate data. Neural, physiological, and behavioural data collected during intimate relational interactions are among the most sensitive categories of personal data that can be collected: they capture the private emotional lives of individuals at moments of genuine vulnerability and genuine intimacy. The storage, analysis, and potential disclosure of such data must be governed by protocols that go beyond standard data protection requirements, including strict access controls, anonymisation procedures that are robust against re-identification, and explicit commitments about the conditions under which data may be shared with other researchers or used for purposes not specified in the original consent.

The intervention effect. The act of measuring relational dynamics may alter those dynamics—not only through the reflexive knowledge effect noted above, but through the more direct effects of the measurement apparatus itself. Wearing EEG or fNIRS headsets

in a naturalistic environment is not a neutral act; it changes the phenomenology of the shared experience and may thereby change the very neural and physiological dynamics being measured. Research designs should include explicit assessment of the intervention effect, comparing the measured dynamics in wired and unwired conditions and modelling the difference as a nuisance variable.

5.8.4 Potential Biases

A research programme of this kind is subject to several sources of bias that must be acknowledged and managed.

Selection bias. Couples who are willing to participate in dyadic neuroimaging research are not a random sample of intimate dyads: they are likely to be more educated, more reflective about their relational dynamics, more comfortable with scientific procedures, and possibly more securely attached than the general population of intimate couples. The results of studies conducted with such samples may not generalise to the full range of intimate relational forms, and this limitation must be explicitly acknowledged in the reporting of results.

Cultural bias. The phenomenology of shared contingent events, the forms of sharing, and the cultural meaning of co-presence are not universal but culturally specific. A research programme conducted primarily with Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) participants (Henrich et al. 2010) will capture a particular cultural instantiation of relational co-evolution, not its universal form. The cross-cultural chapter of this paper (§5.12) identifies several non-Western frameworks—Japanese *ma* and *en*, Confucian relational ethics, Ubuntu philosophy—that suggest different phenomenological structures for shared contingent experience; a fully adequate empirical research programme would need to test the GRB account across these cultural contexts.

The laboratory effect. The artificial constraints of the laboratory environment—the scanner bore, the wired headset, the experimenter’s instructions, the knowledge of being observed—fundamentally alter the phenomenology of the shared experience and may thereby alter the very dynamics being studied. A flower encountered on a laboratory monitor, presented by an experimenter as a stimulus, is not the same relational event as a flower encountered on a path in the course of a shared walk. The ecological validity of

laboratory paradigms for studying relational co-evolution is genuinely limited, and the research programme must invest in naturalistic methodologies—fNIRS in the field, experience sampling methods, longitudinal diary studies—that complement the high-control, low-validity laboratory paradigms.

The reductionist trap. The most subtle and philosophically significant bias in a research programme of this kind is the temptation to treat the neural and physiological measures as the *explanation* of relational happiness rather than as its *correlates*. Inter-brain synchrony is not relational happiness; it is the neural correlate of relational happiness, measured at a particular level of description. The multi-level framework of the GRB account is precisely designed to resist this reductionist temptation: it insists that the formal, the neural, the physiological, and the phenomenological are genuinely distinct levels of description, none of which is reducible to the others, and that a complete account of relational happiness requires all of them. Empirical researchers working within this programme must resist the temptation—always present in neuroscience—to treat the measurement level as the explanation level, and must maintain the multi-level commitments of the framework throughout the interpretation of their results.

The empirical programme as a relational ethics. The empirical research programme proposed here is not merely a methodological exercise but an enactment of relational ethics. Research on intimate relational dynamics that treats the dyad rather than the individual as the unit of analysis, that develops consent procedures adequate to the relational character of the subject matter, and that resists the reductionist temptation to collapse the phenomenon to its neural correlates, is itself an instance of the epistemic hospitality that *Paper XIII* identified as the condition for genuine understanding across irreducibly different perspectives (Huang 2026). The researcher who studies intimate relations with this kind of methodological care is, in a modest way, practising the relational attentiveness that the theory recommends.

5.9. Phenomenology of Relational Happiness

The preceding sections have developed the GRB account of relational happiness from the outside in: from the ontological framework, through the formal dynamical model, to the empirical research programme. Before we proceed to the formal eudaimonistic reconstruction of §5.10, we must pause and attend to the phenomenon from the inside—to the quality of relational happiness as it presents itself to those who experience it, in its own phenomenological structure, prior to any theoretical reduction or formal representation.

This section is deliberately different in register from those that precede it. It does not advance formal claims or cite empirical evidence. It attends, carefully and at length, to what the shared flower actually feels like—to the texture, the structure, and the distinctive character of the happiness that arises in the relational field. Phenomenological description of this kind is not merely rhetorical; it is philosophically necessary. A theory of happiness that cannot recognise what it is theorising about—that cannot show that its formal apparatus captures the phenomenon as it is actually lived—is a theory that has lost its object. The phenomenological section is the test of the theory’s fidelity to the experience it claims to explain.

5.9.1 The Quality of Relational Happiness: What It Is Not

The best way to approach the quality of relational happiness is to begin by distinguishing it from neighbouring phenomena that share some of its surface features but differ from it in essential ways. This *via negativa* is not mere rhetorical caution; it is a precise philosophical move, because the neighbouring phenomena are precisely those that the individualist theories of happiness have described, and the differences are precisely where the individualist theories fall short.

It is not pleasure. The happiness of the shared flower is not the pleasure of a pleasant sensory experience. Pleasure is a property of a sensory state—it is what it is like to have a pleasant taste, or a pleasant sensation of warmth, or the mild visual pleasure of a pretty object. The happiness of the shared flower is not like this: it does not have the simple, immediate quality of sensory pleasure, and it does not reside in the sensory properties of the flower. The flower may be pretty, but a pretty flower seen alone does not produce

what is produced when the flower is shared; and two people can share something quite plain—a bird’s call, a particular quality of light, an unexpected smell—and produce the same happiness that the flower produces. The shared happiness is not in the sensory properties of the shared object but in the sharing itself.

It is not the satisfaction of desire. Desire is directed toward an absent object: its satisfaction is the achievement of what was previously lacking. But the happiness of the shared flower is not the satisfaction of anything that was previously lacking; it arises from the fullness of co-present attention, not from the gratification of a prior want. The person who notices the flower and shares it with their beloved is not satisfying a desire; they are, as it were, offering something that has appeared unexpectedly, something that neither sought and both receive.

It is not flow. As argued in §5.3.3, flow is the happiness of full absorption in a challenging activity, characterised by the matching of skill and challenge, the recession of self-consciousness, and the distortion of time. The happiness of the shared flower has none of these features: there is no challenge, no skill being exercised, no task being performed. If anything, the happiness of the shared flower involves a heightening rather than a recession of self-consciousness—a heightened awareness not of the self in isolation but of the self as present to and with the other. And the time distortion of the shared flower is different from that of flow: not the loss of time-awareness but its transformation into a quality of presence, a sense that *this moment* has a fullness and completeness that ordinary time does not.

It is not pride or achievement. The happiness of the shared flower is not the happiness of having done something, accomplished something, or become something. Neither person has done anything to merit the flower; it is given, contingently, by the world. The happiness is, in this sense, a form of gratitude rather than of pride: gratitude not directed at anyone in particular—the flower was not placed there for them—but a kind of ontological gratitude, an openness to the gift of what is simply there.

5.9.2 The Positive Structure of Relational Happiness

Having distinguished relational happiness from its neighbours, we can now describe its positive structure—the features that are distinctively its own and that the individualist

theories systematically fail to capture.

It arises from the between, not from either person. The most fundamental phenomenological feature of relational happiness is that it does not feel as though it comes from within oneself. It arises—there is no better word—*between* the two people, in the space that their co-presence has constituted. The person who notices the flower and shares it feels, at the moment of sharing, not “I am happy because I see this flower” but something more like “something is happening between us that is making both of us happy.” The happiness has a quality of exteriority relative to either person: it comes from outside each individual, from the relational field that both participate in but neither controls.

This felt exteriority is not alienation. It is not the experience of being moved by an external force that one does not understand or endorse. It is, rather, the experience of receiving something that has been generated by the relational field—something that one has participated in producing but that exceeds what either person could have produced alone. The happiness of the shared flower is, in this sense, a form of relational grace: something given to both by the relational field they have constituted together.

It has the character of resonance. When the flower is shared and the beloved responds—when the response makes clear that both have been touched by the same contingent beauty—there is a moment of resonance: a sense that something in the other is vibrating at the same frequency as something in oneself, that the two dynamical systems are, for this moment, in alignment. This resonance is not the fusion of two identities into one; it is more like the overtone that arises when two instruments play the same note: both retain their distinct timbre, their individual character, but something new arises from their sounding together that neither produces alone.

The phenomenology of resonance is the felt correlate of what the formal framework describes as synchronisation: the transient alignment of the two dynamical systems’ rhythms produced by the shared contingent event. But the formal description, however precise, does not capture the quality of the experience—the sense of mutual recognition, of being known and knowing, of the other’s presence as a presence that completes rather than threatens. The resonance is, in this sense, a form of relational recognition: the experience

of being seen by the other, not as an object of their gaze but as a co-subject of a shared experience, a co-presence in the *between*.

It involves a particular quality of time. The shared flower alters the quality of time. Ordinary time is sequential and forward-directed: one moment leads to the next, the present is perpetually dissolving into the past and being replaced by the future. The time of the shared flower is different: it is a time that has been deepened, given a third dimension of co-present fullness that ordinary sequential time lacks. The moment of sharing is not merely a point in the sequence of moments; it is a moment that has been constituted as a *moment*, a unit of shared presence that has its own integrity and completeness.

This temporal deepening is related to, but distinct from, the time distortion of flow. In flow, time passes unnoticed because attention is fully absorbed in the task; the distortion is a forgetting of time. In the shared flower, time does not pass unnoticed; it is noticed differently—as something that has acquired a quality of presence, a fullness, that makes the present moment feel both complete in itself and continuous with the accumulated history of shared moments that have constituted the relational field. The shared flower is, in this sense, a temporal event in the relational field: it both belongs to the present moment and carries the weight of the entire history of sharing that has made this moment possible.

It is irreversibly constitutive. One of the most striking phenomenological features of relational happiness is that it changes both people in a way that cannot be undone. The flower, once shared, becomes part of the relational field: it joins the accumulated history of shared moments that constitute the *between*, and neither person is quite the same as they were before the sharing. This is the phenomenological correlate of the relational STDP modification described in §5.7: the structural change produced by the shared event is permanent, even if its effects are subtle. The couple who shared the flower on the path carry that sharing with them, not necessarily as an explicit memory but as a slight modification of the relational attractor landscape—a tiny increment of the holonomy that constitutes their shared life.

5.9.3 Relational Flow: The Pure Form of Co-present Happiness

Among the forms of relational happiness, there is one that deserves special attention because it most directly challenges the individualist account and most clearly reveals the distinctive structure of relational co-evolution: the form that we call relational flow, of which the paradigm case is two people sitting together, doing nothing, in the wordless co-presence of deep intimacy.

Relational flow is the state in which the relational field is, for a sustained period, in a condition of deep co-evolutionary resonance—a condition in which the coupling is strong, the attunement is deep, the threshold for relational spikes is low, and the two dynamical systems are moving through the relational phase space in a harmonious, mutually entrained trajectory. It is called flow by analogy with Csikszentmihalyi's concept, but it differs from individual flow in every essential feature: there is no task, no challenge, no skill-matching, no individual absorption. There is only co-presence—the sustained, quiet, mutually held presence of two people in the relational field they have constituted.

The paradigm case—two people sitting together, doing nothing, deeply happy—is philosophically decisive because it is precisely the case that the individualist account of happiness cannot accommodate. On Csikszentmihalyi's account, there is no flow here; on Aristotle's account, there is no virtuous activity; on Maslow's account, there is no self-actualisation; on Seligman's account, there is minimal positive emotion (no excitement, no elation), minimal engagement (no task), and the only PERMA component clearly present is Relationships. And yet anyone who has experienced this form of happiness knows that it is one of the deepest and most complete forms of human flourishing—not a thin or impoverished happiness but a rich and full one, the happiness of a relational field that is in its own proper condition, doing what it does best.

Relational flow as paradigm. The paradigm case of relational flow—two people sitting together, doing nothing, in the wordless co-presence of deep intimacy—is the purest and most philosophically decisive form of relational happiness. It is decisive because it is precisely the case that all individualist theories of happiness systematically cannot

accommodate, and because it reveals, in the clearest possible form, the distinctive features of relational happiness: its arising from the between, its character of resonance, its particular quality of time, and its irreversible constitutive effect on the relational field.

What is happening, dynamically, in the state of relational flow? The two people are not doing nothing, in any dynamically meaningful sense: they are maintaining, through sustained co-present attention, the conditions for deep coupling—the joint attentional orientation, the embodied resonance, the physiological co-regulation—that keep the relational system in a regime of strong coupling and low threshold. The “doing nothing” of relational flow is, in this sense, a highly active state at the level of the relational field: it is the active maintenance of the conditions for co-evolutionary resonance, the continuous work of keeping the *between* alive and receptive.

This is why relational flow is not the absence of activity but a particular form of activity—relational activity, activity at the level of the field rather than at the level of either individual. And this is why it requires cultivation: the capacity for sustained relational flow is not given by nature but developed through the practices of relational attentiveness that §5.13 will discuss. Two people who have not developed the capacity for sustained co-present attentiveness cannot achieve relational flow; they will find the silence uncomfortable, the lack of task anxiety-provoking, the wordlessness alienating. Relational flow is an achievement of the relational field, not a default state; it requires the development of the relational capacities that make it possible.

5.9.4 The Temporality of Relational Happiness: Depth vs. Intensity

A final phenomenological observation concerns the temporal character of relational happiness as it evolves over the course of a shared life. The happiness of the early relation is characterised by intensity: the dramatic spikes of the first shared contingent events, the rapid modifications of the relational landscape, the sense of discovery and novelty that accompanies the constitution of a new *between*. This intensity is real and valuable; it is the happiness of a relational system whose coupling is rapidly increasing, whose attractor landscape is rapidly forming, whose every shared event produces a large and vivid

structural modification.

But intensity is not the highest form of relational happiness. The happiness of the mature relation—the happiness of two people who have shared a long history of contingent events, who have developed the deep shared attractor landscape of a life together—is characterised not by intensity but by *depth*: a quiet, stable, resonant happiness that is less dramatic than the early relation’s intensity but more complete, more resilient, and more fully expressive of what relational flourishing can be.

The difference between intensity and depth is the difference between the first shared flower and the thousandth: the first produces a large relational STDP modification, a vivid spike of inter-brain synchrony, a memorable moment of shared discovery. The thousandth produces a smaller individual modification, a quieter spike of synchrony—but it occurs within a relational field that has been shaped by the cumulative effect of the previous nine hundred and ninety-nine, and it is received by a *between* that has been constituted, through all those previous sharings, into something of great depth and resilience. The happiness of the thousandth flower is the happiness of a relational field that has accumulated, through a lifetime of shared contingent events, the holonomy of a genuinely shared life.

This distinction between intensity and depth has practical implications that §5.13 will explore. But its phenomenological significance is already clear: it means that the highest form of relational happiness is not the excitement of new discovery but the quiet resonance of deep co-presence—the happiness, as one might say, of a *between* that has become a home.

Depth as the highest form of relational happiness. The highest form of relational happiness is not intensity—the dramatic spikes of early relational co-evolution—but depth: the quiet, stable, resonant happiness of a mature relational field that has accumulated, through a lifetime of shared contingent events, the holonomy of a genuinely shared life. Depth is not the diminution of intensity but its transformation: the accumulated product of all the intensities that have entered the relational field and been

integrated into its attractor landscape, now present as the quiet completeness of a *between* that has become a home.

5.10. Eudaimonistic Reconstruction: Happiness as Emergent Signal of Relational Co-evolution

The phenomenological description of the preceding section has shown us, from the inside, what relational happiness is like: how it arises from the between, how it has the character of resonance, how it transforms the quality of time, and how it differs in its deepest form from the intensity of early relational encounter. We are now in a position to give this phenomenological description its theoretical articulation: to state, precisely and at the appropriate level of abstraction, what relational happiness *is*—what kind of thing it is, where it is located, what generates it, and what its relationship is to the individual flourishing that the eudaimonist tradition has described.

This section executes the eudaimonistic reconstruction in three movements. The first states the central claim of the GRB account of happiness—happiness as the emergent signal of relational co-evolution—and defends it against obvious objections. The second locates relational happiness within the three registers of the GRB framework (imaginary, symbolic, real), arguing that the deepest form of relational happiness is a phenomenon of the real register. The third addresses the relationship between relational and individual flourishing, arguing that the GRB account does not eliminate individual flourishing but reconceives it as a moment within the larger structure of relational *eudaimonia*.

5.10.1 The Central Claim: Happiness as Emergent Signal

The central claim of this paper’s eudaimonistic reconstruction can be stated in a single sentence: **relational happiness is the emergent signal of the relational field’s co-evolutionary activity**. Each element of this formulation requires unpacking.

Emergent. The happiness is emergent in the technical sense: it is a property of the relational field that cannot be reduced to the properties of the individual systems that

compose the field, and that arises at the level of the field through the dynamical interactions of those systems. It is not the sum of two individual happinesses; it is not the average; it is not any function of the individual happinesses that could be computed from knowledge of each individual's state alone. It is a new property, arising at a new level of organisation, irreducible to what exists at the level below.

The emergent character of relational happiness explains why it *feels* as though it comes from the between: because it does. The felt quality of exteriority—the sense that the happiness is coming from somewhere that is not quite within oneself—is an accurate perception of an emergent property. The individual is perceiving, from within the relational field, a property of the field that is not a property of themselves individually. This perception is not an illusion; it is the most accurate perception available of what is actually happening.

Signal. The happiness is a signal—a piece of information—that the relational field generates and transmits to the individuals who participate in it. What information does it carry? It carries information about the state of the relational field: specifically, it signals that the field is currently engaged in productive co-evolutionary activity—that the coupling is strong, that the shared attractor landscape is being traversed in a generative way, that the relational STDP mechanism is producing structural modifications that deepen and enrich the field. The happiness is, in this sense, the relational field's way of telling its participants that it is doing well—that it is flourishing, in its own relational mode of flourishing.

This signal character of happiness is not an ad hoc addition to the theory but a consequence of its dynamical foundations. In any complex system with multiple levels of organisation, the higher level generates signals that propagate down to the lower level and modify the behaviour of the lower-level components. The signals that a healthy biological organ sends to the organism of which it is a part—the felt signals of comfort, warmth, satiety, pleasure—are the organ's way of communicating to the organism that it is functioning well and that the organism's behaviour is supporting its continued functioning. The relational happiness signal is the relational field's analogue of these biological signals: it communicates to the individual participants that the field is functioning well and that their shared behaviour is supporting its continued co-evolution.

Of the relational field's co-evolutionary activity. The happiness signals a specific kind of relational activity: co-evolution. It is not the signal of any pleasant state of the relational field but of the state in which the field is actively engaged in the co-evolutionary process—in the joint processing of contingent events, the dynamic modification of the shared attractor landscape, the accumulation of relational holonomy. A relational field that is stagnant—that has ceased to co-evolve, that is no longer responsive to contingent events, that has hardened into fixed patterns that no longer develop—does not generate the happiness signal even if it is comfortable, stable, and conflict-free. The happiness requires co-evolution, not mere coexistence.

Happiness as emergent signal of co-evolution. Relational happiness is the emergent signal that the relational field generates when it is engaged in productive co-evolutionary activity. It is emergent because it is a property of the field irreducible to the properties of either individual; it is a signal because it carries information about the field's co-evolutionary state to the individuals who participate in it; and it is specifically the signal of co-evolutionary activity, not of any merely comfortable or stable relational state. The felt happiness of the shared flower is the individual's reception of this signal—the way in which the relational field's co-evolutionary activity presents itself to the individuals who constitute it.

5.10.2 Objections and Replies

The central claim will face several objections that must be addressed before proceeding.

Objection 1: The signal account makes happiness too cognitive. One might object that describing happiness as a signal that carries information makes it sound too cognitive, too much like a piece of data to be processed, and not enough like the warm, immediate, felt quality of actual happiness. Happiness is not the reception of a signal; it is a lived experience with its own irreducible quality.

Reply: The signal account does not deny the irreducible felt quality of happiness; it describes the functional role of that quality within the relational system. Just as the felt quality of pain is not reduced by the functional description of pain as a signal that tissue damage has occurred—the phenomenology of pain remains exactly what it is—the felt quality of relational happiness is not reduced by the functional description of happiness as a signal of co-evolutionary activity. The phenomenological description of the previous section and the functional description of the present section are complementary accounts of the same phenomenon at different levels of description. Neither reduces to the other, and both are necessary for a complete account.

Objection 2: Not all shared happiness involves co-evolution. One might object that there are forms of shared happiness—two strangers who laugh together at the same joke, or two people who happen to notice the same beautiful thing simultaneously—that are not instances of co-evolutionary dynamics in any interesting sense. The strangers are not a coupled dynamical system; they do not have a shared attractor landscape; their interaction does not produce structural modifications of a relational field. And yet they are happy, together, in a way that seems genuinely relational.

Reply: The GRB account does not deny that there are weaker and stronger forms of relational happiness, or that the happiness of strangers who laugh together is a genuine phenomenon. It claims that the *paradigm* of relational happiness—the form that most fully instantiates the concept and that the eudaimonist tradition has consistently failed to account for—is the happiness of an intimate relational field engaged in deep co-evolutionary activity. The happiness of strangers is a real but thin instance of relational happiness: it involves minimal coupling, no shared attractor landscape, and no structural modification. The happiness of intimate partners sharing a flower is a rich instance: it involves strong coupling, a deep shared attractor landscape, and significant structural modification. The theory is not falsified by the existence of thin instances; it is confirmed by the existence of thick ones and by the fact that the thick instances are precisely where the individualist theories most conspicuously fail.

Objection 3: The happiness might be explained by the individual's pleasure at the other's pleasure. A more subtle objection holds that the happiness of the shared flower can be fully explained at the individual level by the following mechanism:

person A is pleased by the flower, person B notices person A's pleasure and is pleased by it, and person A notices person B's pleasure at A's pleasure and is further pleased, and so on in a cascade of mutual positive affect. On this account, the happiness is genuinely social in origin—it involves the other's response—but it remains individual in structure: each person's happiness is caused by the other's, but each is still an individual happiness caused by an external stimulus.

Reply: This objection correctly identifies a mechanism that is genuinely present in the shared flower—the mutual positive affect cascade is real and empirically well-documented. But it fails to account for the emergent character of the happiness: the fact that the cascade produces something that is not the sum of the individual happinesses but a qualitatively different phenomenon. The mutual affect cascade is the mechanism through which the relational field's co-evolutionary activity is initiated; it is not itself the relational happiness but one of the processes through which relational happiness is generated. More fundamentally, the objection presupposes the individualist ontology that the GRB framework rejects: it assumes that the unit of analysis is the individual happiness, and that the relational happiness is composed of individual happinesses in mutual causal relation. The GRB account holds, on the contrary, that the relational happiness is primary—that it is the happiness of the field, and that the individual's experience of it is the field's happiness perceived from a particular constituted perspective.

5.10.3 The Three Registers of Relational Happiness

The GRB framework's three registers—imaginary, symbolic, and real—provide a further dimension of the reconstruction. Relational happiness can occur in any of the three registers, and the form it takes in each register is distinct. A complete account of relational *eudaimonia* must map these distinctions.

Imaginary register happiness is the happiness of identification and idealisation: the happiness of seeing oneself reflected in the beloved's eyes as the person one wishes to be, or of seeing the beloved as the idealised object of one's desire. This is the happiness of the early relation, of falling in love, of the mirror stage of intimate encounter. It is real and intense—the dramatic spikes of early relational co-evolution correspond, in part, to the powerful imaginary investments of idealisation—but it is unstable: the idealised image is

always threatened by the reality of the other's irreducible particularity, and the happiness built on imaginary identification is always liable to collapse when the ideal is disappointed. The happiness of the shared flower, when it occurs primarily in the imaginary register, is the happiness of sharing with the idealised beloved—the beauty of the flower is magnified by the imaginary investment in the person with whom it is shared.

Symbolic register happiness is the happiness of recognition and acknowledgment: the happiness of having one's existence, one's contributions, and one's significance acknowledged by the other within the framework of the shared symbolic order—the language, the rituals, the social forms through which intimate relations are constituted and sustained. The gift, the anniversary, the declaration of love, the shared joke that belongs to the couple's private language: these are sources of symbolic register happiness, and they are real and important sources of relational flourishing. But they share the limitation of all symbolic goods: they can be forged, performed, or deployed without genuine relational co-evolution, and the happiness they produce is accordingly shallower and more fragile than the happiness of the real register. **Paper XIII's** analysis of forged trust—the trust produced by the appearance of genuine self-investment without its substance—is directly relevant here: forged symbolic happiness is the appearance of relational co-evolution without its reality (Huang 2026).

Real register happiness is the deepest and most stable form of relational happiness: the happiness of an encounter with the irreducible particularity of the other and of the shared moment, an encounter that resists full symbolisation and exceeds the imaginary investments that surround it. The happiness of the shared flower, at its deepest, is a happiness of the real register: it is the happiness of this particular flower, shared with this particular person, at this particular moment in the history of this particular relational field—a happiness that cannot be captured in any general description, that cannot be fully communicated, that leaves a remainder that exceeds all symbolic elaboration. The real register happiness is the happiness of genuine co-presence: the happiness of being with the other as they actually are, not as they appear in the imaginary or as they are constituted in the symbolic.

The priority of real register happiness. Among the three registers of relational happiness, the real register is primary: it is the deepest, most stable, and most irreducible form, the form that most fully instantiates the concept of relational *eudaimonia*. Imaginary and symbolic register happiness are real and valuable, but they are vulnerable to the disillusionment of idealisation and the inflation of symbolic goods respectively. Real register happiness—the happiness of genuine co-presence, of the encounter with the other’s irreducible particularity—is not vulnerable to these failures: it cannot be forged, cannot be inflated, and does not depend on the maintenance of an idealised image.

5.10.4 Relational *Eudaimonia* and Individual Flourishing

The final question the reconstruction must address is the relationship between relational *eudaimonia*—the flourishing of the relational field—and individual flourishing. The GRB account has argued that the primary subject of flourishing is the relational field, not the individual; but this raises an obvious question: what, then, is the status of individual flourishing? Is it eliminated by the GRB account? Is it a mere epiphenomenon of relational flourishing? Or does it retain an independent significance within the framework?

The answer is that individual flourishing is neither eliminated nor reduced to a mere epiphenomenon, but reconceived as a *moment within* the larger structure of relational *eudaimonia*—a necessary moment, without which relational *eudaimonia* would be impossible, but a moment that achieves its fullest significance within the relational whole.

This reconception can be made precise. Individual flourishing—the development of the individual’s capacities, the exercise of the individual’s virtues, the realisation of the individual’s potential—is a necessary condition for the richest relational flourishing: a relational field composed of individuals who are not themselves developing, exercising their capacities, or realising their potential is a field in which the co-evolutionary dynamics are impoverished. Each individual brings to the relational field the resources of their individual development—their particular capacities, their unique perspective, their specific way of noticing and responding to contingent events—and the richness of the relational field’s co-evolutionary dynamics depends on the richness of these individual contributions.

Individual flourishing feeds relational flourishing.

But the relationship is also reciprocal: relational flourishing feeds individual flourishing. The individual who participates in a richly co-evolving relational field is themselves developed by that participation—their capacities are expanded by the demands of co-evolution, their perspective is enlarged by the encounter with the other’s irreducible particularity, their virtues are exercised and deepened by the practices of shared life. The relational field is not merely the arena in which individual flourishing occurs; it is a generative environment that produces individual flourishing as one of its outputs.

The relationship between relational and individual flourishing is therefore neither unidirectional nor competitive but **mutually generative**: individual flourishing enriches the relational field, and the relational field enriches the individuals who participate in it. This mutual generativity is the formal content of what the GRB framework calls the spiral structure of relational development: each turn of the spiral both requires and produces individual development, and each individual development both requires and produces relational development. The spiral is the form of their mutual implication.

Relational *eudaimonia* as mutually generative. Relational *eudaimonia*—the flourishing of the relational field as the primary subject—and individual flourishing are mutually generative rather than competitive. Individual flourishing enriches the relational field by bringing to it the resources of individual development; relational flourishing enriches the individual by generating, through co-evolutionary dynamics, developments that the individual could not have achieved alone. The spiral structure of relational development is the form of this mutual generativity: each turn of the spiral both requires and produces individual development, and each individual development both requires and produces relational development.

This mutual generativity is the deepest vindication of the relational account of happiness. It shows that the GRB framework does not sacrifice the individual to the relation—it

does not ask the individual to dissolve into the relational field for the sake of relational flourishing—but rather shows that the fullest individual flourishing and the fullest relational flourishing are not in competition but in spiral co-implication. The person who develops most fully as an individual is, in the GRB account, the person who participates most richly in a co-evolving relational field; and the relational field that flourishes most fully is the one whose participants are most fully developed as individuals. This is the eudaimonist content of what Buber said philosophically: in the beginning, and in the end, is the relation.

With the eudaimonistic reconstruction complete, we turn to the hermeneutic re-reading of the classical happiness concepts that the reconstruction makes possible. The question is no longer merely whether these concepts are adequate to relational happiness—we have established that they are not—but how they are transformed when the relational field is placed at the centre of the analysis.

5.11. A Generative-Relational Hermeneutics of Classical Happiness Theories

The reconstruction of the previous section has established the theoretical framework within which the classical happiness concepts must now be re-read. The task of this section is not merely critical—we have already, in §5.3, shown where each tradition falls short of the shared flower. The task is hermeneutic in Gadamer’s sense (Gadamer 2004): a reading that brings the classical concepts into dialogue with the GRB framework, allowing each to illuminate the other, and that produces, through this dialogue, a richer understanding than either tradition could achieve alone. The goal is not the replacement of the classical concepts but their transformation—their relocation within a framework that preserves their genuine insights while correcting their individualist presuppositions.

5.11.1 Virtue (*Arēte*) as Relational Achievement

Aristotle’s concept of virtue (*aretē*) is the excellence of a capacity: the state of character in which a person responds to the situations they face in the best possible way, with the right motivation, at the right time, toward the right objects (Aristotle 2000). Virtues are

developed through practice: one becomes courageous by doing courageous things, just by doing just things, generous by doing generous things, until the excellent response becomes second nature—a stable disposition that is exercised reliably and without great effort.

The GRB hermeneutics of virtue begins by asking: what happens to this account when the primary subject of flourishing is relocated from the individual to the relational field? The answer is that virtue is reconceived as a relational achievement rather than an individual one.

In the first instance, this means that many virtues are constitutively relational: they are not properties of individuals considered in isolation but properties of relational fields. Generosity, for example, is not simply the individual's disposition to give; it is the disposition to give in a way that responds to the particular neediness, the particular situation, the particular dignity of this other person—a disposition that is exercised in a relation and that is shaped by the history of that relation. The generous person in an intimate relation is not generous in the abstract but generous toward this particular person, in the way that this particular person can receive generosity, at the moment when generosity is what the relation calls for. This relational specificity of virtue is something that Aristotle's account, for all its sophistication, does not fully capture.

More fundamentally, the GRB account holds that virtues are not simply brought *to* the relational field by individuals who already possess them; they are *generated* by the relational field through co-evolutionary dynamics. The courage that one shows in a difficult shared situation is not simply the exercise of a previously developed individual virtue; it is, in part, a response to the relational field's demand—a response that would not have taken the form it takes, or perhaps would not have occurred at all, without the specific dynamics of this particular relational encounter. The relational field calls forth virtues from its participants that the participants did not previously know they possessed; and in calling them forth, it develops them—it produces, through the co-evolutionary dynamics of the shared situation, a virtuous response that becomes, through the relational STDP of the shared experience, a more stable disposition in each participant.

Relational virtue. Virtue, under the GRB hermeneutics, is not merely exercised in relations but generated by them. The relational field calls forth virtuous responses from its participants that the participants could not have produced alone, and in calling them forth, it develops the virtuous dispositions of the participants through the co-evolutionary dynamics of shared experience. Virtue is a relational achievement, not a prior individual possession that is subsequently deployed in relational contexts.

5.11.2 Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*) as Relational Cognition

Phronesis—practical wisdom, the capacity to deliberate well about what conduces to flourishing in particular circumstances—is, for Aristotle, the master virtue: the intellectual virtue that governs the exercise of all the others, determining what the virtuous response is in each particular situation (Aristotle 2000). It is irreducibly particular: it cannot be captured in rules or algorithms but requires the kind of perceptual sensitivity to concrete situations that only experience can develop.

Under the GRB hermeneutics, *phronesis* is reconceived as relational cognition: a form of practical intelligence that is distributed across the relational field rather than concentrated in the individual. The practically wise response to a shared situation is not the response of the most practically wise individual in the dyad; it is the response that emerges from the joint deliberation, joint perception, and joint wisdom of the relational field as a whole.

This relational reconception of *phronesis* has several dimensions. First, the relational field has access to more information than either individual: each partner perceives aspects of the situation that the other misses, and the joint deliberative process—the conversation, the exchange of perspectives, the mutual correction of individual blind spots—produces a richer and more accurate perception of the situation than either individual could achieve alone. Second, the relational field has a form of practical memory that exceeds the individual's: the accumulated history of shared decisions, shared mistakes, and shared learning that constitutes the relational field's deliberative wisdom is not stored in either individual's memory alone but in the relational attractor landscape that has been shaped

by all previous co-evolutionary responses to shared situations. Third, the relational field exercises a form of practical wisdom that is specifically attuned to the needs and character of the relational system: the joint decision that best serves the relational field's flourishing is not necessarily the same as the decision that best serves either individual's flourishing, and the practically wise couple has developed the capacity to distinguish between these.

5.11.3 Friendship (*Philia*) Reconstituted

Aristotle's analysis of *philia*—encompassing friendship, love, and all forms of care for another—is among the most philosophically rich parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2000). Aristotle distinguishes three forms: friendship of utility (valued for what one gets from it), friendship of pleasure (valued for the enjoyment it provides), and friendship of virtue (valued for what the friend is in themselves—their character, their excellence, their irreplaceable particularity). Only the third form is *philia* in the fullest sense; the first two are incomplete instances that share some features of true friendship but lack its essential character.

The GRB hermeneutics of *philia* begins by affirming the basic structure of Aristotle's analysis—the distinction between the three forms, and the priority of virtue-*philia*—but relocates the entire analysis within the relational ontology. Aristotle's virtue-*philia* is a relation between two individuals who love each other for what they are; the GRB account holds that the deepest form of *philia* is not the relation between two pre-existing individuals but the co-constitution of two subjects within a shared relational field.

The friend, on the GRB account, is not primarily a person I love for what they already are, independently of our relation; the friend is a person who is, in part, what they are *because of* our relation—a person whose character, sensitivities, and virtues have been shaped by the co-evolutionary dynamics of our shared life, just as mine have been shaped by theirs. The love that binds us is not the love of a pre-existing excellence but the love of what we have become together—a love that has itself been generated by the co-evolutionary dynamics of the relational field and that cannot be fully understood apart from those dynamics.

Aristotle's famous remark that the friend is “another self” (*allos autos*) receives a new meaning under this relational reconception. The friend is not another self in the sense of

a self who resembles me or who shares my values; the friend is another self in the sense of a self who has been co-constituted with me, in the same relational field, through the same history of shared contingent events—a self whose being is, in part, constituted by and continuous with my being, not through any mystical fusion but through the concrete dynamical history of a shared life.

5.11.4 Flow as Relational Resonance

Csikszentmihalyi's account of flow—optimal experience arising from the matching of skill and challenge in individual absorption—has already been shown, in §5.3.3 and §5.9.3, to be inadequate to the phenomenon of relational flow. Here we give the positive GRB account of what relational flow is and how it relates to the individual flow that Csikszentmihalyi describes.

Relational flow is the state of the relational field in which co-evolutionary resonance is sustained over an extended period: a state of strong coupling, low threshold, deep attunement, and harmonious joint trajectory through the relational phase space. It is the dynamic condition in which the relational field is most fully itself—most fully engaged in the co-evolutionary activity that is its distinctive form of flourishing.

The relationship between individual flow and relational flow is one of mutual support but genuine difference in kind. Individual flow—the absorption of a skilled practitioner in a challenging task—can contribute to relational flow by bringing each partner to a state of engaged, present attentiveness that facilitates coupling. And relational flow can create the conditions for individual flow by providing each partner with the deep attunement and mutual support that reduces anxiety and enables the full exercise of individual capacity. But neither is reducible to the other, and neither is a special case of the other: they are genuinely different forms of optimal experience, arising at different levels of the dynamical system.

The paradigm case of relational flow—two people sitting together, doing nothing, in wordless co-presence—instantiates the defining features of relational flow in their purest form: no individual task, no individual challenge, no individual absorption. Only the relational field, in its own proper state of harmonious co-evolutionary resonance. The *doing nothing* of this paradigm case is, as §5.9.3 argued, the most demanding form of

relational activity: it requires the sustained cultivation of co-present attentiveness, the active maintenance of the conditions for deep coupling, and the willingness to allow the relational field to be what it is without imposing individual agendas upon it.

5.11.5 *Ataraxia* Reconsidered: Relational Serenity

The Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia*—the undisturbed tranquillity of a mind freed from fear, anxiety, and the excessive pursuit of pleasure—has a genuine philosophical value that the GRB account does not simply reject (Epicurus 1994). The insight that many forms of human suffering arise from unnecessary anxiety, from the pursuit of pleasures that bring more pain than they are worth, and from false beliefs about what matters, is genuine and important. But the Epicurean remedy—the withdrawal from the social world into the tranquil pleasures of philosophical friendship in the Garden—is, from the GRB perspective, a retreat from the relational condition rather than its fulfilment.

The GRB hermeneutics of *ataraxia* proposes a relational form of serenity: not the tranquillity of withdrawal but the stability of a relational field that has achieved a deep shared attractor landscape, a strong and resilient coupling, and the capacity to receive contingent events—pleasant and painful alike—without being destabilised by them. This relational serenity is not the absence of perturbation but the capacity to absorb perturbations and integrate them into the co-evolutionary dynamics of the field: to let the contingent events enter the relational field, be processed by the shared attractor landscape, and contribute to the cumulative holonomy of the shared life, without destroying the stability of the field itself.

The Epicurean philosopher who achieves *ataraxia* by withdrawing from the social world has achieved a form of individual stability that is, in its way, admirable. But the couple who achieve relational serenity have achieved something richer and more demanding: a stability that is not purchased by withdrawal but maintained through engagement, a tranquillity that coexists with deep coupling rather than requiring its absence. Relational serenity is the *ataraxia* of the relational field, not of the individual—and it is, in the GRB account, the deeper and more complete achievement.

5.11.6 *Apatheia* Inverted: The Virtue of Relational Vulnerability

The Stoic ideal of *apatheia*—freedom from the passions, the capacity to remain unmoved by what happens in the external world—represents, from the GRB perspective, the clearest formulation of what relational happiness must oppose (Aurelius 2002). For *apatheia* is precisely the closure of the relational threshold: the achievement of a state in which contingent events—flowers on paths, unexpected beauty, shared grief—can no longer enter the individual’s inner life as significant events. The Stoic sage has achieved immunity to the shared flower; in doing so, they have also achieved immunity to relational happiness.

The GRB hermeneutics of *apatheia* does not deny the value of equanimity in the face of what one cannot change, or the importance of not being enslaved to passions that distort judgement and corrupt action. These insights are genuine. But it inverts the Stoic’s evaluative priority: instead of treating vulnerability to the passions as the disease and *apatheia* as the cure, the GRB account treats vulnerability—specifically, the vulnerability of a relational field that is open to receiving contingent events as relational events—as a virtue rather than a deficiency.

Relational vulnerability is the capacity to be moved by what happens in the relational field: to allow the contingent event to enter the field, to lower the threshold of joint attention, to let the flower matter. It is not weakness or instability; it is the form of openness that makes relational co-evolution possible. A relational field that has achieved *apatheia*—that is no longer open to being moved by contingent events, that has closed its threshold to the relational spike—has achieved a kind of invulnerability that is, in the GRB account, not a virtue but a pathology: the pathology of a relational system that has ceased to co-evolve, that has hardened into fixed patterns, that can no longer generate the happiness signal because it is no longer engaged in co-evolutionary activity.

5.11.7 Maslow’s Hierarchy Inverted

Maslow’s hierarchy places self-actualisation at the apex of human motivation: the fulfilment of one’s individual potential as the highest human achievement (Maslow 1954). Under the GRB hermeneutics, this hierarchy requires inversion at its apex. The highest form of human flourishing is not individual self-actualisation—the realisation of the individual’s full potential in relative independence from others—but relational co-actualisation:

the mutual realisation, through the co-evolutionary dynamics of the relational field, of capacities and forms of being that neither participant could have achieved alone.

The inversion does not reject Maslow's lower levels: the physiological needs, the safety needs, the belonging and love needs are real and their satisfaction is genuinely necessary for human flourishing. But it reconceives the relationship between the lower levels and the apex. On Maslow's account, belonging and love (level three) are satisfied on the way to self-actualisation (level five): they are conditions for individual flourishing, not its culmination. On the GRB account, belonging and love are not conditions for a higher individual achievement but the medium in which the highest form of human flourishing—relational co-actualisation—occurs. The apex of the hierarchy is not beyond the relation but within it.

Maslow's peak experiences—moments of transcendence, unity, and profound well-being that characterise the self-actualising person—receive a relational reinterpretation under the GRB account. The deepest peak experiences are not individual moments of transcendence but the shared moments of relational flow in which the relational field achieves its deepest co-evolutionary resonance: the wordless co-presence of two people in deep attunement, the shared encounter with a contingent beauty that enters the relational field as a vivid relational spike, the moment of shared recognition in which both partners feel, simultaneously, the depth of what they have built together.

5.11.8 Self-Determination Theory: Relatedness as Ground, Not Need

Self-determination theory's three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are, in the GRB hermeneutics, reconceived at the level of their foundational ontology. The most significant revision concerns relatedness: in SDT, relatedness is a need of the individual, whose satisfaction contributes to the individual's well-being (Deci and Ryan 1985). In the GRB account, relatedness is not a need of the individual but the ontological ground of the individual—the relational field from which the individual emerges and in which the individual continues to be constituted.

This reconception does not eliminate the genuine insights of SDT. The finding that autonomy-supportive environments produce greater well-being than controlling environments corresponds, in the GRB account, to the finding that relational fields that support

the individual's contribution to co-evolutionary dynamics produce richer co-evolutionary activity than relational fields that suppress or control individual contribution. The finding that competence—the experience of effectiveness and mastery—contributes to well-being corresponds, in the GRB account, to the finding that individual development enriches the relational field by bringing to it the resources of developed individual capacity.

But the reconception is real: SDT asks how individual needs are satisfied in social contexts; the GRB account asks what kind of relational field best supports co-evolutionary flourishing. The former takes the individual as its fundamental unit and asks how the social environment serves the individual's needs; the latter takes the relational field as its fundamental unit and asks how individual development serves and is served by the field's co-evolutionary activity. These are different questions, and they yield different practical implications.

5.11.9 Frankl's Meaning as Relational Emergence

Frankl's account of meaning as the primary human motivation—and of love as one of its highest sources—is, in the GRB hermeneutics, preserved in its essential insight but relocated in its ontological structure (Frankl 1959). Frankl holds that meaning is found or created by the individual in engagement with the world; the GRB account holds that the deepest meaning is not found or created by the individual but generated by the relational field through co-evolutionary dynamics.

The meaning of the shared flower is not the meaning that either person assigns to it individually; it is the meaning that the relational field generates through the act of sharing—a meaning that belongs to the *between*, that is irreducible to either person's individual attribution, and that neither could have produced alone. This relational meaning has the character that Frankl associates with genuine meaning: it is felt as given rather than made, as discovered rather than invented, as belonging to the world rather than merely to the subject. Frankl is right that the deepest meaning feels given; the GRB account explains why: because it is given—given by the relational field to the individuals who participate in it, as the emergent product of their co-evolutionary activity.

Frankl's account of love—as the encounter with the unique and irreplaceable personhood of the beloved—also receives a GRB transformation. The beloved's irreplaceable person-

hood is not a pre-existing property that the lover discovers; it is, in part, a product of the relational co-evolution between lover and beloved. The beloved's specific character—the particular way in which they are irreplaceable—has been shaped by the history of the relational field, by the co-evolutionary dynamics that have developed both participants and constituted them as the specific persons they are in relation to each other. The irreplaceable beloved is, in part, a relational achievement: the product of a shared life's co-evolutionary dynamics, not merely a pre-existing given that the lover is fortunate enough to encounter.

5.11.10 Subjective Well-Being Dissolved and Reconstituted

The concept of subjective well-being (SWB)—the individual's own evaluation of their life, including both cognitive judgements (life satisfaction) and affective components (positive and negative affect)—is, under the GRB hermeneutics, simultaneously dissolved and reconstituted.

It is dissolved at the level of its fundamental presupposition: the presupposition that well-being is a property of a subject, and that the relevant subject is the individual. If the primary subject of flourishing is the relational field, then the concept of individual subjective well-being—however carefully measured and however empirically robust—is not measuring the right thing. It is measuring one aspect of the relational field's flourishing (the individual's felt experience of the field's co-evolutionary activity, from one of the perspectives the field has constituted) while systematically missing the field-level properties that are the primary locus of flourishing.

It is reconstituted, however, as **relational subjective well-being**: a measure not of the individual's evaluation of their life but of the dyad's shared evaluation of their relational field. This reconstituted concept would include: the dyad's shared assessment of their co-evolutionary dynamics (are they developing together? are they generating new shared attractors? is their coupling deepening?), their shared experience of relational flow (how often do they achieve states of deep co-present resonance?), and their shared sense of the meaning generated by their relational field (does the field generate significance that neither could generate alone?). A measurement instrument based on these dimensions would be genuinely novel and would yield empirical findings that the standard SWB

measures systematically miss.

5.11.11 The PERMA Model Relationally Reconceived

Seligman's PERMA model—Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—is, among the modern positive psychology frameworks, the one that most explicitly acknowledges the multi-dimensional character of well-being (Seligman 2011). The GRB hermeneutics of PERMA does not reject this multi-dimensionality but relocates each dimension from the individual to the relational field.

Positive emotion (P) becomes relational positive affect: the shared emotional states generated by the relational field's co-evolutionary activity, including the happiness of the shared flower, the shared joy of relational flow, and the shared satisfaction of co-evolutionary achievement. These are not the sum of two individual positive emotions but the emergent affective properties of the field.

Engagement (E) becomes relational engagement: the state of the relational field in which both participants are fully present to the co-evolutionary dynamics—not absorbed in individual tasks but genuinely co-present to each other and to the contingent events that enter the shared field. Relational engagement is the dynamic condition that makes relational flow possible.

Relationships (R), which in the original model names one of five individual needs, becomes, in the GRB account, the foundational category from which all the others are derived: not one component among five but the ontological ground of the entire framework. This is the most radical transformation: what is a component in the individualist model becomes the ground in the relational model.

Meaning (M) becomes relational meaning: the significance generated by the relational field through co-evolutionary dynamics—the meaning of the shared life, the shared project, the shared history of contingent events that have constituted the *between*. This relational meaning exceeds the individual meanings that either participant can generate alone and is felt, by both, as belonging to the field rather than to either of them.

Accomplishment (A) becomes relational accomplishment: the achievements of the relational field as a whole—the shared attractor landscape that has been built through a

lifetime of co-evolutionary activity, the depth and resilience of the coupling that has been developed, the richness of the *between* that has been constituted. These relational accomplishments are not reducible to the individual accomplishments of either participant; they are achievements of the field, belonging to the *between* that both have built together.

The PERMA model relationally reconceived. Under the GRB hermeneutics, each of the five PERMA dimensions is transformed when the relational field replaces the individual as the primary subject of flourishing. Positive emotion becomes relational affect, Engagement becomes relational co-presence, Relationships becomes the ontological ground of all the others, Meaning becomes relational emergence, and Accomplishment becomes the achieved depth of the relational attractor landscape. The transformed PERMA model is a genuine positive psychology of the relational field, not a psychology of the individual in social context.

The hermeneutic re-reading of the classical happiness concepts is now complete. Each concept has been both preserved in its genuine insight and transformed in its ontological location: from the individual to the relational field, from the properties of persons to the emergent properties of the *between*. The result is not the replacement of the classical tradition but its fulfilment: the completion of insights that the classical thinkers glimpsed but could not fully articulate within the individualist ontology they inherited and, for the most part, never questioned. Before drawing the conclusions of the paper, we must attend to a further dimension that the hermeneutic re-reading has not yet addressed: the cross-cultural dimension of relational happiness, which both confirms the GRB account and subjects it to the critical scrutiny of traditions that have approached the relational field from very different directions.

5.12. Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Relational Happiness

The GRB account of relational happiness has been developed, in the preceding sections, primarily in dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition—existentialism, eudaimonism, and the modern psychology of well-being. This dialogue has been necessary and illuminating, but it carries a risk that must now be confronted: the risk that the account is not a universal theory of relational happiness but a particular cultural construction, shaped by the conceptual frameworks and experiential norms of a specific tradition, and presenting itself as universal in the way that all cultural particulars are tempted to do when they lack the mirror of genuine cross-cultural encounter.

This section provides that mirror. It examines four non-Western frameworks—Japanese conceptions of *ma* and *en*, Confucian relational ethics, Ubuntu philosophy, and the broader question of the GRB account’s own cultural situatedness—not merely to confirm the account through cross-cultural comparison but to subject it to genuine critical scrutiny. The cross-cultural encounter is, in the spirit of the GRB framework itself, a form of relational co-evolution at the level of philosophical traditions: it should produce something richer than either tradition possessed before the encounter, and it should be willing to modify the account in light of what the encounter reveals.

5.12.1 Japanese *Ma* (間): The Generative Interval

The Japanese concept of *ma* (間)—often translated as interval, gap, pause, or space—is one of the most philosophically rich concepts in the Japanese aesthetic and cultural tradition, and one of the most directly relevant to the GRB account of relational happiness (Nishida 1990). *Ma* is not merely the empty space between two things but the generative interval that constitutes both things as the things they are: the pause between two musical notes that gives each note its character, the space between two architectural elements that makes the building breathe, the silence between two words in a conversation that allows the words to mean.

The relevance of *ma* to the GRB account is immediate and profound. The *between* that the GRB framework identifies as the primary site of relational happiness is precisely the kind of generative interval that *ma* names: not the empty space between two pre-existing

individuals but the positive relational space that constitutes the individuals as the beings they are in relation to each other. *Ma* is the Japanese cultural articulation of what the GRB framework calls the relational field: a positive ontological region, generative of what occurs within and around it, irreducible to either of the things it stands between.

The Japanese aesthetic tradition has developed the concept of *ma* with a precision and richness that Western philosophy has not matched. In the arts, *ma* is the principle that determines where to leave space, when to be silent, how much emptiness is needed for the fullness to mean. In architecture, *ma* is the interval between rooms, between garden and interior, between built and unbuilt space, that gives the whole its character and makes movement through it meaningful. In music, *ma* is the pause that makes the phrase—the silence that is not the absence of music but its continuation by other means.

In interpersonal life, *ma* is the quality of shared silence that characterises deep intimacy: the capacity of two people to be together without speaking, without acting, without filling the space with content, and to find in that shared silence not emptiness but fullness—the fullness of a *between* that has been constituted through a long history of shared presence and that can now sustain itself in silence. This is precisely the phenomenology of relational flow that §5.9.3 described: the two people sitting together, doing nothing, deeply happy. The Japanese aesthetic tradition has a name for this state and has cultivated it as an art form; the GRB framework provides its philosophical analysis.

The encounter with *ma* both confirms and enriches the GRB account. It confirms the account by demonstrating that the insight into the generative character of the relational interval is not a Western philosophical novelty but an ancient cultural recognition—one that a major non-Western tradition has developed with great sophistication. It enriches the account by adding a dimension that the formal dynamical analysis does not fully capture: the aesthetic dimension of relational happiness, the sense in which the shared silence is not merely a state of deep coupling but a form of beauty—a beauty that requires cultivation, that is produced through the long work of building a relational field deep enough to sustain it.

***Ma* and the generative interval.** The Japanese concept of *ma* provides an ancient and sophisticated cultural articulation of the GRB framework's core concept of the *between*: the positive, generative relational interval that constitutes the individuals it stands between and that is the primary site of relational happiness. The paradigm of relational flow—the shared silence of deep intimacy—is the interpersonal instantiation of *ma*, and the Japanese aesthetic tradition's cultivation of *ma* as an art form is a cultural practice of relational happiness cultivation that anticipates and confirms the GRB account.

5.12.2 Japanese *En* (縁) and Chinese *Yuan* (緣): The Ontology of Relational Contingency

The Japanese concept of *en* (縁) and its Chinese cognate *yuan* (緣)—variously translated as fate, destiny, bond, affinity, or relational contingency—provide a cultural ontology of the contingent event's role in the constitution of intimate relations that is directly relevant to the GRB account (Nishida 1990).

En/yuan names the fact that an intimate relation was initiated by a contingent encounter—a meeting that might not have occurred, a moment of joint attention to a shared object (perhaps a flower on a path) that happened by chance—and that this contingency is not merely the historical origin of the relation but a constitutive dimension of its present significance. When Japanese or Chinese speakers say of an intimate relation that it is marked by deep *en/yuan*, they are saying something philosophically precise: that the relation bears the mark of its contingent origin, that the contingency of the founding encounter is not overcome by the subsequent development of the relation but is preserved within it as a source of its significance.

This cultural ontology of relational contingency is a striking independent confirmation of the GRB account's claim that contingency is not merely the occasion for the formation of a relation but a constitutive dimension of the relation's ongoing character. The flower on the path is not merely the historical occasion of a happiness that could subsequently have been generated by other means; it is a moment in the relational field's ongoing constitution—a moment that, through the relational STDP mechanism, has permanently

modified the attractor landscape of the field and continues to be present in all subsequent traversals of that landscape.

The cultural practice of celebrating *en/yuan*—of attending to the contingent occasions of one’s significant relations, of treating the apparently accidental encounter with gratitude and reverence, of understanding one’s intimate bonds as gifts of contingency rather than achievements of will—is a form of relational attentiveness that the GRB account recommends on theoretical grounds. The cultural tradition has arrived, through a different route, at the same practical conclusion: that the cultivation of relational happiness requires the cultivation of openness to contingency, of readiness to receive what is simply there, of gratitude for the flower that might not have been.

5.12.3 Confucian Relational Ethics: *Ren* (仁) and the Constitution of the Person

The Confucian tradition offers perhaps the most systematic pre-modern philosophical account of relational ontology, and its concept of *ren* (仁)—often translated as benevolence, humaneness, or loving-kindness, but better understood as the relational virtue that constitutes the person as a person—provides a powerful non-Western confirmation of the GRB framework’s core ontological claims (Confucius 1998; Tu 1985).

The character for *ren* is composed of two elements: the character for person (人) and the character for two (二). This graphic etymology is philosophically significant: *ren* is literally the virtue of two persons in relation—the virtue that exists between persons, not within any single person considered alone. For the Confucian tradition, the person is not constituted independently of relations and then enters into them; the person is constituted *through* relations, and the cultivation of the person is inseparable from the cultivation of the relations through which the person comes to be. 仁者愛人—“the person of *ren* loves others”—is not merely a moral prescription but an ontological description: the person who possesses *ren* is, by that very possession, already in a relation of care and attention to others, because *ren* is constitutively relational.

The Confucian Five Relations (五倫)—ruler and minister, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger sibling, friend and friend—are not a taxonomy of the different types of relation that the pre-constituted individual might enter into; they are the ontological infrastructure through which the person is constituted. To be a person, in the

Confucian account, is to occupy a position within this relational infrastructure—to be already a child, a sibling, a friend, a partner—and the cultivation of virtue is the cultivation of these relational positions, the deepening of the qualities that each relation calls for and generates.

The GRB account both affirms and critiques the Confucian framework. It affirms the core ontological insight: the person is constituted through relations, and the cultivation of the person is inseparable from the cultivation of the relational field. It critiques the hierarchical and asymmetric structure of the Five Relations, which, in their traditional form, constitute some parties to the relation as the active cultivators of virtue and others as the passive recipients of care, and which thereby fail to recognise the genuinely co-evolutionary character of the relational field: the fact that both parties are constituted by and constitutive of the relational dynamics, and that the relational field's flourishing requires the full participation and development of all its members.

Under the GRB hermeneutics, *ren* is reconceived as the fundamental relational virtue—not the virtue of one party caring for another but the virtue of the relational field itself: the generative quality of a relational system in which all participants are fully engaged in the co-evolutionary dynamics, in which no participant is rendered merely the recipient of another's care, and in which the mutual constitution of all parties through the shared dynamical process is recognised and cultivated. This reconceived *ren* is the Confucian virtue liberated from its hierarchical structure and extended to its full relational implications.

Confucian *ren* and relational virtue. The Confucian concept of *ren*—the relational virtue that constitutes the person as a person through the practice of care and attentiveness toward others—provides a non-Western philosophical foundation for the GRB account's core ontological claim that the person is constituted through relations. Under the GRB hermeneutics, *ren* is reconceived as the virtue of the relational field itself: the generative quality of a co-evolutionary system in which all participants are fully engaged, none is merely a recipient of another's virtue, and the mutual constitution of all through the shared dynamical process is both recognised and actively cultivated.

5.12.4 Ubuntu Philosophy: “I Am Because We Are”

The African philosophical concept of Ubuntu—expressed in the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“a person is a person through other persons”) or, in its most widely known formulation, “I am because we are”—is perhaps the most direct non-Western articulation of the relational ontology that the GRB framework defends (Mbiti 1970; Metz 2011).

Ubuntu holds that personhood is not a pre-given individual property but a relational achievement: one becomes a person through participation in a community, through the recognition of others, through the exercise of the virtues that community life calls forth and sustains. The isolated individual, on the Ubuntu account, is not a full person but an impoverished one: a person who has been cut off from the relational conditions that constitute personhood, and who can only be restored to full personhood through reintegration into the relational community.

The GRB account both resonates deeply with this Ubuntu insight and extends it in a specific direction. The resonance is evident: the core ontological claim of Ubuntu—that the individual is constituted through relations, that personhood is a relational achievement, that the individual’s flourishing is inseparable from the community’s flourishing—is structurally identical to the GRB account’s claim about the relational field as the generative ground of the individual subject. Ubuntu provides a living cultural instantiation of the GRB ontology, demonstrating that the relational account of the person is not a philosophical novelty but an ancient human recognition that has sustained entire communities and civilisations.

The extension that the GRB account adds to the Ubuntu framework is the formal dynamical analysis: the account of how the co-evolutionary dynamics work, what the mechanism of relational STDP is, how the shared attractor landscape is built through the cumulative effect of shared contingent events. Ubuntu tells us that the person is constituted through others; the GRB account explains, with dynamical precision, *how* this constitution occurs—what the structural modification looks like, what the threshold conditions are, what the

temporal dynamics of coupling and synchronisation involve. The two frameworks are complementary: Ubuntu provides the cultural and ethical ground, the GRB account provides the formal and empirical scaffolding.

The Ubuntu framework also enriches the GRB account by extending the relational field beyond the dyad. The GRB analysis has focused primarily on the intimate dyad—the couple who share the flower on the path—but Ubuntu’s relational ontology is constituted at the level of the community: it is through the community of persons, not merely through the dyadic relation, that full personhood is achieved. This community dimension of Ubuntu points toward an extension of the GRB framework that the present paper can only gesture toward: the account of how the intimate relational field is embedded within and sustained by wider relational communities, and how the happiness of the dyadic field is both supported by and contributes to the happiness of the wider community in which it is situated.

5.12.5 The GRB Account’s Own Cultural Situatedness

Having examined the GRB account in dialogue with four non-Western frameworks, we must now turn the critical lens on the GRB account itself and ask: what are its own cultural presuppositions? What blind spots does it carry from the particular traditions in which it has been developed?

Several potential sources of cultural bias can be identified.

The dyadic focus. The GRB account has centred on the intimate dyad as the paradigm of the relational field, and has used the couple—two people walking together, noticing a flower, sharing a moment—as its primary illustrative case. This dyadic focus reflects, in part, the individualist tradition’s reduction of social life to dyadic relations, and it may miss the irreducibly communal character of relational life that the Ubuntu framework and the Confucian Five Relations both emphasise. A fully adequate GRB account would need to extend its dynamical analysis to relational fields of more than two participants, and to consider how the happiness of dyadic relations is embedded within and shaped by the wider communal fields in which they are situated.

The romantic couple as paradigm. The paper’s use of the romantic couple as its

paradigm case of the intimate relational field reflects a particular cultural privileging of romantic love as the highest form of intimacy—a privileging that is itself culturally specific and that other traditions, including many non-Western ones, do not share. The Confucian tradition places parent-child and elder-younger sibling relations at least as high as spousal relations; the Ubuntu tradition centres communal belonging rather than romantic dyads; the Aristotelian tradition privileges the friendship of virtue over romantic love. A more culturally comprehensive account would need to show that the GRB analysis applies across these different forms of intimate relation, and would need to resist the implicit privileging of romantic love that the paper’s choice of examples may convey.

The Western philosophical vocabulary. The GRB account has been developed in and through the vocabulary of the Western philosophical tradition—dynamical systems, emergence, holonomy, the three registers of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Heideggerian *between*. This vocabulary may itself introduce cultural presuppositions that are not visible from within the tradition and that non-Western frameworks can help to identify. The *ma/yuan/ren*/Ubuntu encounter has already suggested some ways in which the Western vocabulary may be insufficient: the concept of *ma*, for example, captures dimensions of the relational interval that the dynamical systems vocabulary does not easily accommodate, and the Ubuntu concept of communal personhood suggests extensions of the GRB framework that its dyadic focus has not developed.

Cultural situatedness and the demand for ongoing dialogue. The GRB account of relational happiness is not culturally neutral. It carries presuppositions from the Western philosophical tradition—a dyadic focus, a privileging of romantic love, a reliance on Western philosophical vocabulary—that the cross-cultural encounter has identified and that future work must address. The appropriate response to this cultural situatedness is not to abandon the GRB account but to engage in the kind of ongoing cross-cultural dialogue that the framework itself recommends: a dialogue that is genuinely open to modification, that treats the non-Western frameworks as genuine philosophical interlocutors rather than as confirmatory examples, and that is willing to extend, revise, and deepen the account in light of what the dialogue reveals.

The cross-cultural encounter has done what such encounters, at their best, always do: it has both confirmed and complicated the account. It has confirmed the core ontological claim—that the relational field is the primary site of happiness, that the individual is constituted through relations, that the contingent event is the medium through which relational co-evolution is triggered—by showing that this insight is independently reached, in different conceptual vocabularies and from different experiential starting points, by traditions with no historical contact with the Western philosophical tradition that the GRB account primarily inhabits. And it has complicated the account by identifying cultural presuppositions that require further work and by suggesting extensions—toward communal relational fields, toward non-romantic forms of intimacy, toward non-Western philosophical vocabularies—that the present paper can only begin to gesture toward.

With the cross-cultural examination complete, we turn to the practical question: how is relational happiness cultivated? What are the practices through which the theoretical insights of the GRB account become available to those who live in intimate relational fields?

5.13. Praxis: The Cultivation of Relational Happiness

A theory of happiness that cannot say how happiness is to be cultivated—that provides a philosophically rigorous account of what happiness is and where it is located but remains silent on how it is to be achieved—is incomplete in a way that the eudaimonist tradition, from Aristotle onward, has consistently refused to accept. *Eudaimonia* is not merely a theoretical object but a practical one: it is the kind of thing that is achieved through practice, maintained through habit, and lost through neglect. The GRB account of relational happiness is no exception to this practical demand. If relational happiness is the emergent signal of the relational field's co-evolutionary activity, then the cultivation of relational happiness is the cultivation of the conditions that make co-evolutionary activity possible and sustain it over time.

This section develops four practical dimensions of relational happiness cultivation. They are not four independent techniques to be applied separately but four aspects of a single

integrated practice: the practice of building and maintaining a relational field that is deep, responsive, and generatively alive. Each dimension addresses a specific condition for co-evolutionary activity, and together they constitute what might be called a *relational eudaimonic practice*—a way of living within an intimate relation that cultivates the conditions for the deepest form of shared happiness.

5.13.1 Attentional Practice: The Cultivation of Relational Readiness

The first and most fundamental practical dimension is attentional: the cultivation of a quality of shared presence that lowers the threshold for relational spikes and makes the relational field responsive to the contingent events that enter it. The flower on the path cannot enter the relational field as a relational event if neither person is attending—if both are absorbed in their individual preoccupations, their anxieties, their screens, or their plans. The threshold for joint attention must be met before a contingent event can trigger co-evolutionary dynamics, and this threshold is not automatically met; it must be actively cultivated.

The attentional practice of relational happiness is not the same as mindfulness in the individual sense—though it draws on the same underlying capacities of sustained, non-judgmental attention. Individual mindfulness cultivates the individual’s capacity to attend to their own experience with clarity and equanimity; relational attentional practice cultivates the dyad’s capacity to attend together to the shared field of experience. The difference is precisely the difference between the individual who notices the flower alone and the couple who notice it together: the capacity being cultivated is not individual attention but joint attention, not the lowering of one’s own threshold but the lowering of the shared threshold of the relational field.

Joint attentional practice has several concrete forms. The first is the cultivation of what might be called **relational presence**: the quality of being genuinely co-present to the other—not merely spatially adjacent but attentionally oriented toward the shared field, available for the joint constitution of shared objects. Relational presence is not constant, and it is not necessary or desirable that it be constant; it is a quality that is cultivated through specific practices and that, once cultivated, is available to be activated in the right circumstances. The daily rituals of intimate life—shared meals, shared walks, shared

moments of quiet—are opportunities for the practice of relational presence: moments in which the default orientation is toward the shared field rather than toward individual preoccupation.

The second concrete form is the practice of **shared noticing**: the active cultivation of the habit of attending jointly to the contingent events that appear in the shared field. This is the practice of the shared flower: not the occasional dramatic shared experience but the daily, small-scale practice of noticing and sharing what is simply there—the quality of light, the sound of rain, the unexpected beauty of an ordinary thing. These small sharings are the training ground for the relational attentional capacity: they cultivate the habit of joint attention, lower the shared threshold of the relational field, and accumulate, through the relational STDP mechanism, the structural modifications that deepen the attractor landscape over time.

The third concrete form is the practice of **digital unplugging**: the deliberate creation of conditions in which the individual's attentional resources are not pre-emptively captured by the demands of the digital environment—the notifications, the feeds, the messages, the endless solicitation of individual attention that the contemporary media environment provides. The digital environment is, from the perspective of the relational field, a threshold-raising mechanism: it captures individual attention in ways that make joint attention difficult, that raise the relational threshold and thereby reduce the relational field's responsiveness to contingent events. The deliberate practice of digital unplugging—of creating sustained periods in which both partners are available for joint attention—is not a nostalgic rejection of technology but a practical recognition that the cultivation of relational presence requires the management of attentional resources.

Attentional practice as threshold management. The cultivation of relational happiness begins with attentional practice: the cultivation of the quality of shared presence that lowers the relational threshold and makes the field responsive to contingent events. This practice has three concrete forms: the cultivation of relational presence through shared rituals, the practice of shared noticing through the daily, small-scale sharing of contingent events, and the deliberate management of attentional resources through digital

unplugging. Together, these practices constitute the attentional foundation of relational *eudaimonia*.

5.13.2 Sharing as Practice: Timeliness, Smallness, and the Refusal to Filter

The second practical dimension concerns the act of sharing itself—the constitutive act by which contingent events are introduced into the relational field as relational events. The theoretical analysis of the relational STDP mechanism in §5.7 has specific practical implications: the timing of sharing matters, the scale of the shared event matters, and the habitual filtering of what is “worth” sharing is, from the perspective of relational happiness cultivation, a practice to be scrutinised and, in many cases, unlearned.

Timeliness. The relational STDP analysis shows that the structural modification produced by a shared event decreases exponentially with the temporal distance between the event and the sharing. The flower shared immediately—“look!”—produces a stronger co-evolutionary modification than the flower mentioned that evening, which produces a stronger modification than the flower mentioned a week later. This is not a moral judgement about the relative value of different sharings; it is a dynamical consequence of the coupling mechanism. The practical implication is that the cultivation of timely sharing—the cultivation of the habit of sharing contingent events as they occur, rather than filtering and storing them for later—is a direct contribution to the structural deepening of the relational field.

Timely sharing requires a kind of attentional discipline that is not always easy to maintain: the discipline of noticing what one is noticing, of recognising the relational relevance of a contingent event at the moment of its occurrence, and of acting on that recognition immediately. This is not a discipline of more sharing overall, but of differently distributed sharing: the redistribution of the sharing act from the settled, reflective mode (“I thought of something to tell you”) to the immediate, spontaneous mode (“look!”).

Smallness. The relational STDP analysis also implies that the cumulative structural modification produced by many small sharings over time exceeds the modification pro-

duced by occasional large ones. This is the relational analogue of the neural finding that synaptic plasticity is most effectively induced by repeated, moderate stimulation rather than by rare, intense stimulation (Bi and Poo 1998). The practical implication is that the cultivation of relational happiness is not primarily the cultivation of dramatic shared experiences—the special occasions, the planned adventures, the memorable events—but the cultivation of the daily, small-scale practice of shared noticing: the flower, the bird, the quality of light, the unexpected smell, the small absurdity of an ordinary moment.

This is counterintuitive in a cultural environment that privileges the dramatic and the memorable, that measures the quality of a relation by the intensity of its peak experiences rather than by the depth of its daily texture. The GRB account suggests a different measure: the quality of a relational field is better indicated by the frequency and timeliness of small sharings than by the occasional occurrence of large ones. Two people who share many small contingent events, promptly and spontaneously, are building a deeper relational attractor landscape than two people who share occasional dramatic experiences but live, between them, in attentional isolation.

The refusal to filter. Perhaps the most demanding aspect of sharing practice is the cultivation of what might be called the refusal to filter: the practice of sharing contingent events without subjecting them to the habitual evaluation of whether they are “interesting enough,” “important enough,” or “significant enough” to warrant sharing. This filtering habit is deeply ingrained in most adults: we have learned, through cultural conditioning and the experience of social judgement, to share only what we think will be well received, only what conforms to the norms of interesting conversation, only what reflects well on our perceptual acuity or aesthetic sensibility.

The cultivation of relational happiness requires the partial unlearning of this filter. The flower on the path is not necessarily interesting in any objective sense; it is simply there, contingent, noticed. Its relational value is not in its objective interest but in the sharing itself—in the act of joint attention that introduces it into the relational field as a relational event. The partner who shares only the objectively interesting contingent events, and filters out the ordinary ones, is thereby reducing the frequency of the small relational spikes that are the most important source of cumulative structural modification. The refusal to filter is the practice of treating the ordinariness of contingent experience as

the primary material of relational co-evolution, rather than as the background noise from which the objectively significant events must be extracted.

5.13.3 Co-evolutionary Receptivity: Receiving the Shared Event

The third practical dimension concerns not the initiating act of sharing but the receiving act: the way in which the partner receives the shared event and thereby completes or fails to complete the constitutive act that introduces the event into the relational field. The act of sharing requires two parties, and the quality of the co-evolutionary response depends as much on the receiver's receptivity as on the sharer's timeliness and spontaneity.

Co-evolutionary receptivity is the capacity to receive the shared contingent event as a relational event—to allow it to enter the relational field through the act of joint attention, to respond to the sharer's act of sharing in a way that completes the constitutive act, and to participate in the co-evolutionary dynamics that the shared event triggers. It is the opposite of what might be called **relational deflection**: the habitual response that acknowledges the shared event but returns immediately to individual preoccupation, that processes the shared information but does not allow it to enter the relational field as a relational event.

The phenomenology of relational deflection is familiar: one partner says “look!” and gestures toward the flower; the other glances briefly, says “yes, nice,” and returns to what they were thinking about. The information has been processed; the acknowledgement has been made; but the constitutive act has not been completed. The flower has not entered the relational field as a relational event; it has remained in one person's individual experience while the other has noted it and moved on. No relational spike has occurred; no co-evolutionary modification has been produced; the opportunity for shared happiness has been missed.

The cultivation of co-evolutionary receptivity is, in part, the cultivation of a specific form of relational generosity: the willingness to be interrupted by the partner's act of sharing, to set aside one's individual preoccupation long enough to genuinely attend to the shared object, and to allow oneself to be moved by the contingent event that the partner has introduced into the relational field. This generosity is not self-abnegation; it is a recognition that the partner's act of sharing is a relational gift—an offering to the

between—and that the appropriate response to a gift is gratitude and genuine reception, not distracted acknowledgement.

The practical cultivation of co-evolutionary receptivity involves several specific habits. The first is the practice of **full turning**: when a partner initiates a sharing act, the practice of fully turning toward the partner and the shared object—physically, attentionally, and emotionally—rather than half-turning while maintaining partial engagement with one's individual preoccupation. The full turn is the physical instantiation of the lowered threshold: it makes the body available for the embodied resonance that is the somatic correlate of joint attention.

The second is the practice of **dwelling**: after receiving the shared event, the practice of allowing the attention to dwell on the shared object—to spend a moment with the flower rather than immediately moving on—so that the relational spike has time to trigger the co-evolutionary dynamics before the threshold rises again. Dwelling is the temporal analogue of the full turn: it creates the time necessary for the co-evolutionary response to unfold.

The third is the practice of **relational echo**: the practice of responding to the shared event in a way that reflects back to the sharer the quality of one's reception—not a performative declaration of enthusiasm but the genuine expression of whatever the shared event has called forth, however modest. The relational echo completes the constitutive act of sharing: it confirms to the sharer that the event has entered the relational field as a relational event, and it initiates the resonance that is the beginning of co-evolutionary happiness.

Co-evolutionary receptivity as relational practice. The cultivation of relational happiness requires not only the practice of sharing but the practice of receiving: the cultivation of co-evolutionary receptivity—the capacity to receive the partner's act of sharing in a way that completes the constitutive act, allows the contingent event to enter the relational field as a relational event, and initiates the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate relational happiness. Co-evolutionary receptivity is practised through the

habits of full turning, dwelling, and relational echo, and is cultivated through the general cultivation of relational generosity: the willingness to be interrupted, to attend, and to be moved.

5.13.4 Resisting Individualisation: The Counter-Practice of Relational Primacy

The fourth practical dimension is the most political and the most demanding: the active resistance of the individualising pressures that modernity exerts on intimate relational life, and the cultivation of a counter-practice of relational primacy—the deliberate reorientation of life’s priorities, structures, and habits toward the relational field rather than toward individual achievement, individual experience, and individual flourishing.

The individualising pressures of modernity are pervasive and powerful. The economy values individual productivity, individual career advancement, individual consumption, and individual achievement; it measures the quality of a life by the individual’s accumulated credentials, resources, and experiences, not by the depth of the relational fields in which the individual participates. The media environment—as noted in §5.13.1—is organised around the capture of individual attention, not around the cultivation of joint attention. The therapeutic culture of late modernity values individual self-knowledge, individual emotional regulation, and individual self-actualisation, and treats intimate relations primarily as contexts for individual development rather than as generative fields that are primary subjects of flourishing in their own right.

These pressures are not conspiracies but structural features of the social and economic order, and they cannot be resisted by individual willpower alone. The cultivation of relational primacy requires deliberate counter-structural practices: the organisation of life in ways that privilege the relational field even when the structural pressures of modernity privilege the individual.

Several such counter-practices can be identified. The first is **temporal counter-structuring**: the deliberate organisation of time in ways that protect the shared time of the relational field from the individualising demands of work, social obligation, and individual pursuit.

This is not merely the scheduling of “quality time”—a category that already reflects the individualist assumption that relational time is a special allocation from the normal budget of individual time—but the reconception of time itself: the treatment of shared time as the primary temporal category, from which individual time is allocated rather than the reverse.

The second is **spatial counter-structuring**: the organisation of shared living space in ways that facilitate joint attention and shared presence, rather than in ways that maximise individual privacy, individual productivity, and individual comfort. The design of the shared home—the arrangement of furniture, the organisation of the kitchen, the disposition of shared and individual spaces—is not merely an aesthetic and practical matter but a relational one: it is the physical instantiation of the relational priorities of those who inhabit it, and it either supports or undermines the cultivation of the joint attentional practices that relational happiness requires.

The third is **narrative counter-structuring**: the deliberate cultivation of a shared narrative of the relational life that centres the relational field rather than the individual careers that compose it. The stories that a couple tells about their shared life—to themselves and to others—are not merely descriptions of a pre-existing reality but constitutive acts: they shape the relational field by determining what is attended to, what is valued, and what is understood as the primary subject of the shared story. A narrative that centres individual achievements and individual experiences (“I did this, I went there, I felt that”) is a narrative that individualises the relational life; a narrative that centres shared events, shared responses, and shared developments (“we saw this, we felt that, we became this together”) is a narrative that relationally constitutes it.

The most fundamental counter-practice, however, is what might be called **the practice of non-possession**: the deliberate cultivation of the Daoist virtue of *xuande* (玄德)—to generate without possessing, to act without presuming, to foster without ruling (Laozi 1963)—in the relational context. The possessive attitude toward the relational field—the attempt to own the shared happiness, to claim the shared events as one’s own experiences, to use the relational field as a resource for individual enhancement—is precisely the attitude that, as the GRB framework’s account of evil cycles has established (Huang 2025b), extracts from the relational field rather than contributing to it, and thereby

produces the conditions for the field's degradation.

The non-possessive attitude is not indifference but a particular form of attentiveness: the attentiveness that allows the relational field to be what it is, that does not grasp at the happiness that arises in it but receives it with gratitude and lets it pass, that does not try to hold the flower beyond its moment but attends to the root that makes it possible. 为而不恃，功成而弗居—"to act without presuming on the result, to achieve without dwelling in the achievement." This is not passivity but the highest form of relational activity: the activity of one who has learned that the relational field's happiness is generated by the field itself, and that the individual's task is not to produce it but to cultivate the conditions that allow it to arise.

Non-possession as the foundational relational practice. The most fundamental practice of relational happiness cultivation is non-possession: the cultivation of the Daoist virtue of *xuande* in the relational context—the willingness to generate without possessing, to share without claiming, to participate in the relational field's co-evolutionary activity without attempting to own its products. Non-possession is not passivity or indifference but the highest form of relational attentiveness: the form that allows the relational field to flourish on its own terms, generating the happiness that arises from genuine co-evolutionary activity rather than from the individual's possessive extraction of relational resources.

5.13.5 The Eudaimonic Practice as a Whole

The four practical dimensions—attentional practice, sharing practice, co-evolutionary receptivity, and the resistance of individualisation—are not four separate techniques but four aspects of a single integrated way of being in an intimate relational field. They are aspects of the same underlying orientation: the orientation toward the relational field as the primary site of one's flourishing, and toward one's participation in the co-evolutionary dynamics of that field as the primary form of one's practical activity.

This integrated orientation is what the GRB framework calls **relational eudaimonic practice**: the practical form of the theory that the preceding sections have developed. It is not a list of things to do but a way of being—a form of life, in Wittgenstein’s phrase—that is constituted through the gradual development of the habits, orientations, and dispositions that make deep relational co-evolution possible. Like the Aristotelian virtues, it is developed through practice: one becomes a practitioner of relational happiness by repeatedly doing the things that a practitioner does, until those things become second nature—until the attentional turn, the spontaneous sharing, the receptive dwelling, and the non-possessive participation in the relational field’s activity become the default mode of one’s intimate life rather than the product of deliberate effort.

The temporal horizon of this practice is the lifetime. The cumulative relational happiness that the GRB account identifies as the deepest form of relational *eudaimonia*—the quiet, stable, resonant happiness of a mature relational field that has accumulated, through a lifetime of shared contingent events, the holonomy of a genuinely shared life—is not achieved in a moment or a season but through the long, patient, daily practice of the four dimensions described above. It is the happiness that [Paper IX](#) described in terms of the root rather than the flower ([Huang 2025b](#)): not the brilliant flowering of a moment’s intensity but the deep, quiet, self-sustaining generativity of a root that has been tended through all weathers, through all the contingencies of a shared life, by two people who have learned to cultivate, together, the conditions for what continues.

5.14. Conclusions: At the Boundaries of the Frameworks

This paper has travelled a considerable distance from its starting point: a flower on a path, shared with the person one loves, and the happiness that arises from that sharing. The distance is not a departure from the starting point but a return to it—a return in which the flower is still the flower it was, the sharing is still the sharing it was, but both are now seen in the light of a theoretical understanding that was not available at the beginning. This is the spiral structure that [Paper IX](#) identified as the form of relational development and that the series, in its own form, enacts ([Huang 2025b](#)): the return to the beginning that carries back the holonomy of everything traversed between departure and return.

In keeping with the series' commitment to honest multi-framework analysis—and with the formal established in [Paper IX](#) that genuine conclusions are polyphonic, that each framework says what it can say and honestly acknowledges what it cannot—this concluding section does not offer a synthetic summary that collapses the paper's arguments into a single unified thesis. Instead, it presents the conclusions that each of the paper's major frameworks can and cannot reach, and ends with a reflection on what the paper's incompleteness reveals about the nature of the phenomenon it has been studying.

5.14.1 What the Philosophical Framework Can and Cannot Say

The philosophical framework of the GRB account—its relational ontology, its account of the *between* as a positive ontological region, its reconception of contingency as belonging primarily to the relation rather than to the individual—can say the following with confidence:

The primary subject of relational happiness is the relational field, not the individual. The happiness that arises from sharing the flower on the path is not the sum of two individual happinesses but an emergent property of the relational field: a property that belongs to the *between* and that cannot be located in either participant. The act of sharing is not the communication of a private experience but the constitutive act by which a contingent event enters the relational field and is transformed into a relational event. The subject of contingency is the relation, not the individual.

The philosophical framework cannot say, from its own resources alone, why the relational field has the capacity to generate this emergent happiness—what the mechanism is, how the co-evolutionary dynamics work at the level of neural implementation, what the formal conditions for the emergence of shared attractors are. These questions require the formal and empirical frameworks that the paper has also developed. The philosophical framework establishes the conceptual space within which the formal and empirical questions can be asked; it does not answer them.

The philosophical framework also cannot resolve the tension between the GRB account's relational ontology and the genuine phenomenological reality of individual experience. The individual does experience their own happiness; there is something that it is like to be this particular person noticing the flower and feeling the happiness of sharing it.

The GRB account holds that this individual experience is the relational field's happiness perceived from one of its constituted perspectives, but this claim, however philosophically well-grounded, does not fully dissolve the tension between the primacy of the relational field and the undeniable reality of individual experience. The tension is real, and its resolution—if it has a resolution—lies beyond what the philosophical framework of the present paper can provide.

5.14.2 What the Formal Framework Can and Cannot Say

The formal dynamical systems framework—the coupled oscillator model, the Kuramoto synchronisation analysis, the quantum entanglement structural analogy, the relational STDP mechanism, the phase space analysis of shared attractors—can say the following:

The co-evolutionary dynamics of an intimate relational system are real, formally well-defined, and distinct from the sum of the individual dynamics that compose them. The shared attractors of a coupled dynamical system are not the attractors of either individual system; they are genuine emergent properties of the coupling. The relational STDP mechanism provides a precise account of how contingent events produce structural modifications of the relational field, and it implies specific, testable predictions about the temporal dynamics of sharing and the cumulative trajectory of relational development.

The formal framework cannot say what the felt quality of the shared happiness is—cannot, from its equations and phase diagrams, generate the phenomenological description of §5.9. The formal framework operates at the level of dynamics and structure; it does not operate at the level of experience. The relationship between the formal level and the phenomenological level—the hard problem, in its relational form—remains open, and the present paper does not solve it. It is enough to have shown that the formal and phenomenological levels are complementary descriptions of the same phenomenon, without claiming that either reduces to the other.

The formal framework also cannot guarantee that the structural isomorphisms it has identified—between the relational system and coupled oscillators, between the relational system and quantum entanglement, between the relational system and spiking neural networks—are more than heuristically useful analogies. The formal framework has been presented throughout as providing structural isomorphisms rather than literal identifi-

cations; the limits of this claim must be honestly acknowledged. The relational system is not a quantum system, not a spiking neural network, not a Kuramoto oscillator. It is a system that shares certain formal properties with these well-studied systems, and the shared formal properties illuminate aspects of the relational system's dynamics that would otherwise be difficult to describe with precision. But the illumination is partial, and the limits of the analogies are as important as their applicability.

5.14.3 What the Empirical Framework Can and Cannot Say

The empirical framework—the hyperscanning methodology, the longitudinal dyadic research programme, the physiological synchrony measurements, the behavioural coding protocols—can say the following:

There are empirically testable predictions that follow from the GRB account, and these predictions distinguish it from the individualist alternatives. The prediction that shared contingent events produce greater inter-brain synchrony than the same events experienced independently, the prediction that timely sharing produces stronger physiological coupling than delayed sharing, the prediction that longitudinal co-evolutionary dynamics produce cumulative structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape: these are all empirically tractable claims that can be tested with existing or developable methodology.

The empirical framework cannot confirm the philosophical and phenomenological claims of the GRB account—cannot show, from EEG data or fMRI activations, that the primary subject of happiness is the relational field rather than the individual. The empirical framework operates at the level of neural and physiological correlates; it does not operate at the level of ontological claims. The relationship between the empirical evidence and the philosophical framework is one of mutual constraint rather than unidirectional grounding: the empirical findings constrain the philosophical account by ruling out accounts that are inconsistent with the data, but they do not uniquely determine the philosophical account by entailing it.

The empirical framework also cannot address the cultural and cross-cultural dimensions of the phenomenon without extending its methodology beyond the WEIRD samples that currently dominate the hyperscanning literature. The cross-cultural findings reported in §5.12 are philosophical and anthropological rather than empirical; a genuinely adequate

empirical research programme would need to test the GRB account's predictions across the cultural contexts identified in that section, and would need to develop methodology sensitive to the culturally specific forms that relational co-evolution takes in different traditions.

5.14.4 What the Hermeneutic Re-reading Can and Cannot Say

The hermeneutic re-reading of the classical happiness concepts—the GRB transformations of virtue, *phronesis*, *philia*, flow, *ataraxia*, *apatheia*, Maslow's hierarchy, SDT, Frankl's meaning, subjective well-being, and PERMA—can say the following:

Each of the classical concepts is transformed, rather than simply refuted, by the relocation of the subject of flourishing from the individual to the relational field. The classical concepts retain their genuine insights—the Aristotelian account of virtue as developed through practice, the Stoic insight into the relationship between vulnerability and suffering, Csikszentmihalyi's account of the skill-challenge balance as a condition for optimal experience—while shedding the individualist presuppositions that have limited their application to shared happiness. The hermeneutic result is not the rejection of the classical tradition but its extension and completion.

The hermeneutic re-reading cannot claim that the GRB transformations of the classical concepts are the only possible transformations, or that they are fully adequate to the richness of the original concepts. Each subsection of §5.11 has been, of necessity, a compressed and selective reading of concepts that have generated centuries of philosophical commentary; the GRB transformation has focused on the single dimension most relevant to the present paper's argument, and has inevitably missed dimensions of the original concepts that a more complete treatment would address. The hermeneutic task this paper has begun is not complete; it is an opening of a conversation that future work must continue.

5.14.5 Three Concentric Circles

The paper closes its conclusions with an image that the framework does not generate but that the framework's convergent findings suggest. The happiness of the shared flower, examined from the multiple perspectives of this paper, appears in the form of three

concentric circles.

The innermost circle is the moment itself: the contingent event, the act of sharing, the resonance of joint attention, the felt quality of the happiness that arises from the *between*. This circle is the phenomenological circle—the circle of experience, of the living moment in which the relational field’s co-evolutionary activity presents itself to the individuals who participate in it. It is the circle that the series’ literary envois have always inhabited, from the rose of Paper IX to the red silk of Paper XIII (Huang 2025b; Huang 2026).

The middle circle is the relational field: the accumulated history of shared contingent events, the shared attractor landscape built through a lifetime of co-evolutionary activity, the *between* that has become, through the patient work of shared life, a home. This circle is the dynamical circle—the circle of the coupled system’s trajectory through its phase space, the circle in which the holonomy of the shared life accumulates. The moment of the shared flower belongs to this circle as a relational spike: a small but real modification of the attractor landscape, a tiny increment of the holonomy that, over a lifetime of such increments, constitutes the depth of a shared life.

The outermost circle is the relational field’s embeddedness in the wider social, cultural, and material world: the community, the tradition, the economic structure, the political order that either supports or undermines the conditions for intimate co-evolution. The Ubuntu framework has reminded us that the dyadic relational field is not self-sufficient but is constituted within and sustained by wider relational communities; the political-economic analysis implicit in §5.13.4 has reminded us that the conditions for relational flourishing are not given by nature but produced or destroyed by social and economic structures. The happiness of the shared flower is, ultimately, possible only in a world that provides the material, social, and cultural conditions for the cultivation of joint attention, timely sharing, and the non-possessive participation in the relational field’s co-evolutionary activity.

The three circles of relational *eudaimonia*. Relational *eudaimonia* has three concentric dimensions: the phenomenological (the lived moment of shared happiness, aris-

ing from the *between*), the dynamical (the accumulated attractor landscape of a shared life, built through the cumulative STDP of shared contingent events), and the political-communal (the wider relational and material conditions that make the cultivation of intimate co-evolution possible). A complete account of relational happiness must attend to all three, and a complete practice of relational happiness must cultivate all three—which is to say, it is not only an intimate practice but also, irreducibly, a political and communal one.

5.14.6 Why This Paper Has No Synthetic Conclusion

The reader who has reached this point may have noticed that the paper has not provided the kind of synthetic conclusion that academic papers typically provide: a paragraph or two that draws together the paper’s main arguments into a unified summary, restates the paper’s central thesis in its final and most complete form, and gestures toward the future work that the paper’s findings make possible.

The absence of such a conclusion is not an oversight but a philosophical choice—the same choice that *Paper IX* made and that the series’ formal requires (Huang 2025b). A synthetic conclusion would be a gesture toward the kind of unified, complete, fully stated truth that the GRB framework holds to be unavailable: the kind of truth that would require a metalanguage standing above all the frameworks that the paper has deployed, a view from nowhere that could survey the entire philosophical landscape and declare what the final answer is. The GRB framework holds, with Lacan and the Daoist tradition alike, that no such metalanguage exists—that the truth of the phenomenon is not to be found in any single framework’s account but in the ongoing dialogue between frameworks, each of which illuminates something the others cannot see.

The happiness of the shared flower is not fully captured by the philosophical framework’s account of the *between*, nor by the formal framework’s account of coupled oscillators and relational STDP, nor by the neuroscience of inter-brain synchrony, nor by the phenomenological description of resonance and depth, nor by the hermeneutic transformations of the classical concepts, nor by the cross-cultural encounter with *ma* and Ubuntu. It is cap-

tured by all of these together, in their dialogue and their tension, in what they illuminate and in what they cannot say. The truth of relational happiness is polyphonic: it requires all the voices, and it is not reducible to any one of them.

This is the paper's final claim—not a claim about the nature of relational happiness but a claim about the nature of the philosophical inquiry into it: that such an inquiry is necessarily incomplete, that its incompleteness is not a failure but a fidelity to the complexity of the phenomenon, and that the right response to this incompleteness is not the synthesis that closes the inquiry but the continued practice—of shared attention, of timely sharing, of co-evolutionary receptivity, of non-possessive participation in the relational field's generative activity—that keeps the inquiry alive.

Envoi: Back to the Flower

There is still a flower on the path.

It has not been waiting for the paper to finish. It has been there all along—contingent, unhurried, belonging to no one—while the paper moved through its ontologies and its equations, its hyperscanning protocols and its hermeneutic transformations. It was there when the paper began, and it is here now, and the paper's long traversal of the philosophical landscape has not made it more or less beautiful than it was. What the traversal has done—what it was always trying to do—is to make visible the structure of what happens when it is shared: the invisible geometry of the *between*, the accumulated holonomy of a shared attentive life, the relational field's quiet work of generating, from the raw material of contingent beauty, the happiness that neither person could produce alone.

The flower is brief. It will be gone before the week is out—perhaps before the day is done. This is not a tragedy but a fact, and the paper has tried to show that the right response to this fact is not the clutching that destroys what it tries to preserve, not the anxiety that raises the threshold until nothing can enter, not the melancholy that attends to the wilting rather than to the root. The right response is the sharing: the act by which the flower is introduced into the relational field and transformed—in the moment, and permanently—into a relational event, a tiny increment of the holonomy that constitutes a shared life. The flower passes; the modification remains. The flower is brief; the between endures.

The between endures not because it is invulnerable—it is not; it can be starved of joint attention, degraded by possessive extraction, destroyed by the accumulated weight of unshared contingency—but because it is generative. It generates, from what enters it, more than what entered: the flower yields not only the moment of shared happiness but the structural modification that deepens the attractor landscape, expands the basin of

attraction, lowers the threshold for the next shared event. The between endures because it is not a container that holds things but a process that transforms them—a dynamical field that takes the contingent events of a shared life and weaves them, through the patient work of co-evolutionary activity, into the fabric of a shared world.

This is what she showed me.

Not in any single moment—not in any dramatic revelation or carefully staged encounter—but in the long, quiet, daily practice of shared attention that has constituted, over the years of our shared life, the *between* in which I now live. She showed me, by the patient example of her attentiveness, that the flower on the path is not mine and not hers but ours: that it belongs to the relational field we have constituted together, that its beauty is generated by that field rather than by either of us, that the happiness it gives is the happiness of the *between* signalling its own generative health.

She showed me, by the quality of her co-presence, what relational flow is from the inside: the particular quality of time that arises when two people sit together, doing nothing, in the wordless fullness of a shared present. She showed me that the silence between two people can be as generative as the most articulate sharing—that *ma*, the generative interval, is not the absence of communication but its most essential form.

She showed me—and this the paper has tried to articulate, in all its formal and philosophical complexity—that happiness is not something one achieves but something one receives: that it arises from the *between*, as a gift of the relational field's co-evolutionary activity, when the conditions for its arising have been cultivated with sufficient patience and care.

For her, therefore, this paper. For the girl of the forest and the mountains, who loves the woods and the long road of travelling; who showed me, on a path neither of us had walked before, a flower neither of us had seen; who turned toward me at that moment with the particular quality of attention that I now know is the lowering of the relational threshold, the invitation to joint attention, the constitutive act by which a contingent event becomes a relational event and a relational event becomes, in its small and irreversible way, a

modification of the *between* we have been building together.

We did not know, then, what was happening. We know now—or rather, this paper has tried to know, in the limited and multi-perspectival way that knowing is available to philosophical inquiry—what was always already happening: that the flower was entering a relational field that had been constituted through the accumulated co-evolutionary activity of everything we had already shared; that the act of sharing it was triggering, at multiple levels simultaneously, the co-evolutionary dynamics that the paper has spent all its length trying to describe; that the happiness that arose was the emergent signal of the relational field’s generative activity, the field’s way of telling both of us that it was flourishing.

The flower was ours.

Not because either of us claimed it—not because the claiming of shared objects is the source of relational happiness, which it is not—but because the act of sharing it, without claiming it, had made it so. The flower belonged to the *between*, as all shared contingent events belong to the *between*: not possessed by either, not divided between both, but held in the generative interval of a shared attention that transforms whatever it receives.

偶然相遇，此刻与你分享，感受到了幸福。

A chance encounter—and this moment, shared with you, is happiness.

There is still a flower on the path.

Look.

For her—

the girl of the forest and the mountains,
in whose attention I first learned
that the flower on the path
was always already ours.

本乎此心，自成永恒。

Rooted in this heart, it becomes eternal of itself.

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My deepest gratitude to the one I call the girl of the forest and the mountains—pure, natural, steadfast, and wise. May we share many more happy contingencies together.

也愿世界上所有有趣的人，在反复的日常生活中，受于偶然，得之幸福。

And may all the interesting people in this world—caught in the repetitions of ordinary life—find, through contingency, their happiness.

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CHAPTER 6

The Political Economy of Intimate Relations

Toward a Theory of Generative Relational Wealth

What is wealth? A gold ring, a bride-price, a shared life—which of these is the truest form of riches? This paper takes that question seriously and argues that the answer is not economic but ontological: the form of wealth that organises intimate relations determines whether relational subjects can genuinely exist as co-evolving beings, or whether one or both parties are structurally reduced to exchangeable units within a system of accumulation.

*The paper develops the concept of **Generative Relational Wealth** (GRW): wealth that is generated through co-evolutionary activity in the relational field, that belongs to the **between** rather than to either individual, and whose most fundamental property is that **use does not deplete but may augment**—because GRW is stored not in any material or symbolic medium but in the permanent structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape. GRW is the self-fuel of the relational field: generated through co-evolution, it becomes the dynamic condition for further co-evolution, constituting what we call the **generative relational cycle**.*

Against this concept, the paper maps the major traditions of wealth theory—from mercantilism and classical political economy through Marx’s commodity fetishism and Federici’s social reproduction theory, from Sen’s capabilities approach through Mauss’s gift economy and Eglash’s generative justice—showing in each case what the tradition illuminates and what it misses about wealth in intimate relations. The paper then examines how traditional wealth forms (bride-price, gold, dowry) embed intimate relations within power-structured logics of accumulation, and how three mechanisms—settlement, commodification, and indebtedness—structurally foreclose genuine relational co-evolution.

*A central chapter analyses the **happiness jar**—a thought experiment and practical paradigm in which couples record and process shared moments of happiness—as a case study in GRW accumulation, depletion-resistance, and regeneration. The analysis draws on semiotics (Peirce’s index, Benjamin’s aura), psychoanalysis (Lacanian drive theory, the objet petit a), and theoretical physics (relational STDP, phase-space reconstruction, the Δ between symbolic and real registers) to explain why artistic processing of shared memories can reignite a withering relational cycle—and advances the conjecture, clearly marked as speculative, that the operator $O(x) \sim x'$ generates a non-zero relational remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x) \neq 0$ that is the source of GRW’s inexhaustibility.*

The paper also develops feminist, psychoanalytic, epistemic-justice, and Hegelian-Marxist perspectives on GRW, arguing that: GRW is structurally non-phallic wealth that bypasses the symbolic order’s power structures; care labour is GRW’s primary production mechanism and relational subjectivity its highest form; the recognition of epistemic asymmetry in intimate

relations is a condition for GRW generation; and the dialectical relation between material wealth (necessary condition, secondary aspect) and GRW (primary aspect, generative ground) is irreducible—without symbolic wealth, GRW cannot be sustained; without GRW, symbolic wealth is ontologically impoverished.

This is Paper XV of the Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice series, extending the eudaimonics of Paper XIV (Wanhong 2026) and the generativity theory of Paper IX (Huang 2025) into the domain of political economy.

献给自己深爱的那位
喜欢文化、旅行与大自然的同乡女孩

*For her—
the girl from home,
who loves culture, travel, and the living world.*

与她在故乡的千里之外的相遇，
是自己此生最大的幸运。

*To have found her, a thousand li from home—
this is the greatest fortune of my life.*

也献给天下所有有情人。
*And for all lovers, everywhere,
who have ever wondered what they truly possess.*

取之不尽，用之不竭，因为爱本身就是生成性的。

6.1. Prelude: What Is Wealth?

Consider three scenes.

In the first, a family negotiates a bride-price. Gold changes hands—a quantity agreed upon after careful deliberation, reflecting the woman’s family’s assessment of what they are giving and the man’s family’s assessment of what they are receiving. The transaction is witnessed, documented, culturally sanctioned. When it is complete, both parties know exactly what has been transferred. The wealth is real, visible, verifiable.

In the second scene, two people sit across from each other after fifteen years of shared life. Between them, invisible to any accountant, lies something that neither owns individually and neither could enumerate: the accumulated texture of a life built together—the arguments and reconciliations, the ordinary Tuesday evenings and the extraordinary moments, the flowers noticed on paths and shared without calculation, the griefs endured together and the joys that arose from their *between*. No document records this. No court could adjudicate its distribution. And yet both people, in some inarticulate way, know that it is the most significant thing either of them possesses.

In the third scene, that same couple, after years of exhaustion and the slow accumulation of unshared contingency, finds themselves strangers in the same house. The gold from the first scene—if there was any—remains. The bank accounts are unchanged. But something else has been depleted that cannot be measured in any currency, and its absence is felt as a poverty more complete than any material lack.

What is wealth?

This question, asked in the context of intimate relations, turns out not to be an economic question at all. It is an ontological question—a question about what kinds of things exist, how they are generated, and who can possess them. The form of wealth that organises intimate relations determines whether the relational field can genuinely flourish, whether both parties can participate as genuine co-subjects of a shared life, or whether one or both are structurally reduced to exchangeable units within a logic of accumulation that is fundamentally alien to what intimate relations are for.

The paper that follows is an attempt to think carefully about this question. It proceeds

from a conviction that the major traditions of wealth theory—the mercantilism that treats wealth as accumulation and exchange, the Marxist tradition that analyses wealth as the product of exploited labour, the capabilities approach that reconceives wealth as freedom, the gift economy that understands wealth as flow and social bond—all illuminate something real about wealth in intimate relations, and all miss something equally real. What they miss, this paper argues, is a form of wealth that is irreducible to any of their categories: a form of wealth that is generated through co-evolutionary activity in the relational field, that belongs to the *between* rather than to either individual, and whose most fundamental property is that use does not deplete but may augment.

We call this **Generative Relational Wealth** (GRW).

The central claim. The wealth question in intimate relations is not an economic question but an ontological one: the form of wealth that organises intimate relations determines whether relational subjects can genuinely exist as co-evolving beings. GRW—wealth generated through co-evolutionary activity in the relational field—is the primary form of wealth in intimate relations. It is inexhaustible in the taking and inexhaustible in the using, because it is stored not in any material or symbolic medium but in the permanent structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape. Without understanding GRW, we cannot understand what it means for an intimate relation to flourish—or to fail.

A word on method. This paper is, by necessity, interdisciplinary to a degree that may initially seem excessive. The question of wealth in intimate relations requires political economy (to map the existing traditions and their assumptions), philosophy (to interrogate the ontological foundations), psychoanalysis (to understand the symbolic structures through which wealth and power operate in intimate life), feminist theory (to recover what the dominant traditions have systematically obscured), and formal methods drawn from dynamical systems theory and semiotics (to give the concept of GRW the precision it requires). The paper moves between these registers without apology, because the

phenomenon demands it: a question that is simultaneously ontological, economic, psychological, political, and ethical cannot be adequately addressed from within any single disciplinary perspective.

Several chapters contain speculative formal conjectures—marked explicitly as *open questions*—that go beyond what the current state of theory can rigorously establish. These conjectures are included not to claim more than the evidence supports, but because honest intellectual engagement with difficult questions requires being willing to gesture toward where the argument leads, even when the ground is not yet solid. The reader is invited to treat these sections as invitations to further inquiry rather than as settled conclusions.

A word on this paper's place in the series. Paper IX established the spiral structure of relational generativity and the holonomy framework for distinguishing good from bad relational cycles (Huang 2025). Paper XIV developed the eudaimonics of relational happiness, showing that happiness is the emergent signal of co-evolutionary activity in the relational field (Wanhong 2026). The present paper asks: what is the material and symbolic infrastructure that makes this co-evolutionary activity possible? What forms of wealth support it, and what forms of wealth destroy it? The answer—that GRW is both the product and the fuel of relational co-evolution—is the political economy of the GRB framework: the account of how value is generated, stored, and circulated in the intimate relational field, and why the dominant forms of wealth in modern societies are systematically misaligned with the flourishing of intimate life.

6.2. A Critical Map of Wealth Theories

Before we can develop the concept of Generative Relational Wealth, we must survey the landscape of existing wealth theories and ask, of each: what does it illuminate about wealth in intimate relations, and what does it systematically miss? The survey reveals a striking convergence: every major tradition in the theory of wealth shares, at the level of its fundamental ontology, the assumption that the primary subject of wealth is the individual. The concept of GRW requires a different starting point: a relational ontology in which wealth belongs primarily to the relational field rather than to any individual participant.

6.2.1 Mercantilism: Wealth as Accumulation and Zero-Sum Exchange

Mercantilism holds that wealth consists in the accumulation of precious metals, and that trade is a zero-sum competition: one party's gain is necessarily another's loss (Marx 1976). Three features of mercantilist wealth are directly relevant to intimate relations: it is **material and finite** (discrete, countable objects that can be possessed and transferred); **zero-sum** (the total stock is fixed); and **externally verifiable** (measurable by any competent observer, independently of the parties' feelings).

When mercantilist logic enters intimate relations—most visibly in bride-price and in the use of gold as the medium of relational contracts—it imports all three features. The bride-price treats relational value as a finite, measurable, transferable quantity. The exchange is zero-sum: accounts balance when the agreed gold changes hands. What mercantilist logic cannot see is the generation of relational value within the intimate relation itself—the accumulation, through co-evolutionary activity, of something that was not there before and that belongs to neither party individually. For mercantilism, wealth precedes the relation and is transferred through it; wealth generated by the relation, belonging to the relational field itself, is outside the conceptual framework.

The mercantilist blind spot. Mercantilist wealth logic treats relational value as a finite, transferable, externally verifiable quantity that precedes and is exchanged through the relation. It is constitutively unable to recognise the generation of relational wealth through co-evolutionary activity—wealth that belongs to the *between* rather than to either party, and that is augmented rather than depleted by use.

6.2.2 Classical Political Economy: Labour, Division, and Relational Surplus

Adam Smith's innovation was to locate the source of wealth not in the stock of precious metals but in **labour**: the productive activity through which human beings transform the natural world (Sen 1999). This is a genuine advance—wealth is generated, not merely

transferred. But classical political economy remains limited by its focus on material production: the labour of generating relational value—the emotional labour, the care work, the attentional investment that builds a shared life—is invisible in this framework, because it does not produce material goods and therefore does not count as productive in the technical sense.

Ricardo's concept of **differential advantage** will prove relevant when we consider the distribution of relational surplus: who captures the value generated by co-evolutionary activity in the intimate relational field, and whether that distribution is just.

6.2.3 The Marxist Tradition: Commodity Fetishism, Alienation, and Social Reproduction

Marx's analysis of **commodity fetishism** applies with striking directness to traditional wealth forms in intimate relations (Marx 1976). The bride-price is a commodity fetishism of relational value: the capacity to participate in a shared life is mystified as a property of the gold exchanged. The social relations that produce and distribute this value are obscured behind the appearance of a simple exchange of equivalents.

Marx's concept of **alienation** is equally relevant: the relational value generated through a person's emotional labour and care work is systematically appropriated by the dominant party, leaving the generating party estranged from the value they have produced.

The most important Marxist contribution comes from Silvia Federici's account of **social reproduction** (Federici 2004). Federici argues that capitalism depends on a vast domain of unpaid reproductive labour—emotional support, care work, household maintenance—performed predominantly by women and systematically excluded from the category of productive labour. This reproductive labour is not merely a precondition for productive labour; it is itself value production, and its non-recognition is both economic and epistemological injustice. The GRW framework provides the ontological grounding for Federici's analysis: what is being appropriated when emotional labour is exploited is not merely a service but a genuine form of wealth—irreducible to any commodity category, generated in the relational field, and belonging to the *between*.

The Marxist contribution and its limits. The Marxist tradition contributes two essential concepts: commodity fetishism (the mystification of relational value as a property of exchanged objects) and social reproduction (the systematic non-recognition of emotional and care labour as wealth production). Both converge with GRW theory. But the Marxist tradition remains limited by its individualist conception of the producing subject: it does not yet have the ontological resources to articulate wealth that belongs to the relational field itself.

6.2.4 The Capabilities Approach: Wealth as Freedom

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach reconceives what wealth is for (Sen 1999). The goal of economic development is not the accumulation of material goods but the expansion of human capabilities—the real freedoms people have to lead lives they have reason to value. This resonates deeply with the GRW framework: the question to ask of any wealth form in intimate relations is whether it expands or constrains the relational capabilities of the parties involved.

More fundamentally, the capabilities approach points toward a reconception of relational wealth itself: not a stock of material goods but a set of capacities for relational flourishing—the capacity for joint attention, for timely sharing, for co-evolutionary receptivity, for non-possessive participation in the relational field's generative activity. These relational capabilities are the human substrate of GRW.

The capabilities approach remains limited, however, by its individualist framework: capabilities are conceived as properties of individual persons. The GRW framework requires a relational extension: capabilities that belong to the relational field itself, jointly held and jointly developed, whose expansion constitutes relational flourishing irreducible to the sum of individual capability expansions.

6.2.5 The Gift Economy: Wealth as Flow and Social Bond

Marcel Mauss's analysis of the gift reveals a conception of wealth fundamentally different from commodity logic (Mauss 1990). In gift economies, wealth is not accumulated but

circulated: it flows through the social body, creating and sustaining the relations that constitute community life. Like GRW, gift wealth is essentially relational—its value is constituted by the social relations it creates, not by any intrinsic property of the material object. And like GRW, gift wealth cannot simply be accumulated: the gift that is hoarded loses its relational character.

But GRW differs from gift wealth in a crucial respect: the gift can be given, received, and reciprocated—it is, at least in principle, transferable between individual parties. GRW cannot be given; it can only be generated together. The happiness jar cannot be handed from one person to another; the shared attractor landscape of a life built together cannot be transferred to a new relationship. GRW is more radically relational than the gift: it does not just flow through relations but is constituted by them, making individual ownership or transfer conceptually impossible.

6.2.6 Generative Justice: Wealth as Value Returned to Its Creators

Ron Eglash’s generative justice holds that value should be returned to those who generate it—that the extraction of value without return is injustice, and that just economic arrangements support and enhance the generative capacity of communities (Eglash 2016). This applies directly to intimate relations: when emotional labour generates relational value that is appropriated by the dominant party rather than returned to the relational field, this is a generative justice failure.

But GRW extends this framework crucially. For Eglash, the generator of value is ultimately an individual or community. GRW holds that the primary generator of relational value is the relational field itself: the co-evolutionary dynamics produce wealth that belongs to the field, not to either individual participant. The generative justice question in intimate relations is therefore not just “whose labour produced this?” but “what conditions allow the relational field itself to be a generative system, and are those conditions being sustained?”

6.2.7 Non-Western Wealth Traditions

The non-Western traditions of wealth offer important correctives to the individualist presuppositions of the Western tradition.

Ubuntu philosophy (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*—a person is a person through other persons) holds that wealth, like personhood itself, is constituted through relations (Mbiti 1970; Metz 2011). The isolated individual who accumulates wealth at the expense of community relations is not wealthy but impoverished: they have gained material goods at the cost of the relational substance that constitutes full personhood.

Daoist and Buddhist economics converge on the insight that true wealth consists in non-possessive sufficiency rather than accumulation: 知足者富—those who know sufficiency are wealthy (Laozi 1963). The non-possessive orientation toward relational wealth that the GRW framework recommends is the Daoist and Buddhist economic orientation applied to intimate life.

Confucian relational ethics holds that true flourishing is inseparable from the health of the relational bonds that constitute the social fabric—an implicit theory of relational wealth that anticipates the GRW framework (Tu 1985).

The convergence of non-Western traditions. The non-Western wealth traditions converge on an insight the Western tradition has systematically suppressed: the deepest form of wealth is relational rather than material, generated through the cultivation of genuine relational bonds. GRW theory is, in part, the formal articulation of this ancient intuition within a contemporary philosophical and scientific framework.

6.2.8 The Shared Presupposition and Its Overcoming

Despite their profound differences, the major traditions in wealth theory share a structural feature that limits their application to intimate relations: they all conceive wealth primarily as a property of individuals—something that individuals have, produce, exchange, or are deprived of. Even the traditions most sensitive to the relational dimensions of wealth do not fully achieve the ontological shift that GRW requires: the relocation of the primary subject of wealth from the individual to the relational field.

This shared presupposition is not arbitrary. The most socially organised forms of wealth—the gold in the vault, the commodity in the marketplace, the capability of the individual person—are all, at least in principle, attributable to particular individuals or institutions. Relational wealth—wealth that belongs to the *between*—is systematically invisible to frameworks that begin with the individual, because it cannot be attributed to any individual without distortion.

The next section examines how wealth forms organised by individualist logic enter the intimate relational field and affect its dynamics—and specifically, how three mechanisms of individualisation destroy the conditions for GRW generation.

6.3. Power Structures and Wealth in Intimate Relations

The preceding section mapped the major traditions of wealth theory and identified their shared individualist presupposition. This section turns to the concrete question of how wealth forms organised by individualist and mercantilist logic actually operate within intimate relational fields—how they enter the field, what they do to the relational dynamics, and through what specific mechanisms they generate or destroy the conditions for GRW generation.

The analysis is not a moral indictment of any particular cultural practice. The historical and material conditions under which traditional wealth forms developed, and the functions they served within those conditions, are addressed in §6.11 under the framework of historical materialism. The present section is concerned with the structural analysis: how do specific wealth forms interact with the relational field's co-evolutionary dynamics? The answer, we argue, turns on three mechanisms—settlement, commodification, and indebtedness—that operate, in different combinations and intensities, in both traditional and modern wealth forms in intimate relations.

6.3.1 Bride-Price and Gold: The Mercantilist Form in Intimate Relations

The institution of bride-price—the transfer of material wealth from the groom's family to the bride's family as a condition of marriage—is among the most widely distributed cultural practices in human history, appearing in various forms across sub-Saharan Africa,

East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Europe and the Americas (Mbiti 1970). Its contemporary forms range from the explicit payment of livestock or cash to the more implicit expectation of gifts, hospitality expenditure, and material demonstration of the groom's capacity to support a household.

It is important, before the structural analysis, to acknowledge the diversity of meaning and function that bride-price carries across cultural contexts. In many traditions, bride-price is not understood as a purchase price for the woman but as a gift to her family expressing gratitude and establishing alliance; as a material guarantee of the groom's commitment and capacity; as a mechanism for redistributing wealth across family networks; or as a form of social insurance that provides the bride's family with resources in the event of the marriage's dissolution. These functions are real and should not be dismissed in favour of a reductive reading of bride-price as simple commodity exchange.

Nevertheless, the structural analysis reveals that bride-price, whatever its cultural framing, operates through mechanisms that have determinate effects on the intimate relational field. The question is not what bride-price *means* to the parties involved but what it *does* to the relational dynamics.

What bride-price does is introduce a pre-existing exchange structure into the intimate relational field—a structure that precedes the relation, is determined by factors external to the relational dynamics (the families' negotiations, the cultural norms for appropriate payment, the assessment of the woman's value by criteria external to the relation itself), and that creates a set of relational obligations that are not generated by the co-evolutionary activity of the intimate field but imposed upon it from outside.

This has three specific structural consequences for the relational field. First, it establishes a **symbolic account** of the relational value that has been transferred, making the relation legible to the symbolic order as a completed transaction. The relational value is, in this sense, pre-settled: it has been assessed, quantified, and exchanged before the intimate relation properly begins. Second, it creates a **power asymmetry** within the relational field: one party (the bride) has been the object of the exchange rather than its subject, and this asymmetry is encoded in the founding symbolic structure of the relation. Third, it generates a **baseline of expectation** about the character of relational exchange—if

the founding transaction of the relation was a commodity exchange, then subsequent exchanges within the relation are more likely to be framed in terms of exchange logic rather than co-evolutionary generativity.

None of these consequences is inevitable or irreversible. Intimate relations that begin with bride-price can and do develop rich co-evolutionary dynamics that generate GRW; the founding structure does not determine the trajectory. But the structural tendency is real: bride-price introduces mercantilist logic into the founding moment of the intimate relation, and this founding moment shapes the symbolic structure within which subsequent relational dynamics unfold.

6.3.2 Three Mechanisms of Relational Wealth Destruction

The analysis of bride-price reveals three mechanisms that operate, in various combinations, across traditional and modern forms of wealth organisation in intimate relations. We call these settlement, commodification, and indebtedness.

Settlement: The Closure of Relational Value

Settlement (结算化) is the mechanism by which relational value is converted into a fixed, symbolic quantity—a price, a score, a balance—that closes the relational account. Settlement transforms relational value from an open, generative process into a closed, enumerable fact.

The paradigmatic form of settlement in intimate relations is the assignment of a monetary value to the relation itself: the bride-price that assesses the woman's relational value as a quantity of gold; the divorce settlement that converts the shared life into a balance of assets to be divided; the prenuptial agreement that pre-settles the distribution of relational value before the relation begins. In each case, the living, dynamic, open-ended process of co-evolutionary value generation is frozen into a snapshot—a moment at which the accounts are balanced and the value is fixed.

Settlement is destructive of GRW for a reason that follows directly from the GRW concept: GRW is constitutively non-settleable. Its value cannot be captured in any fixed quantity because it is not a stock but a process—the ongoing co-evolutionary dynamics of the

relational field. To settle GRW is to kill it: the moment the relational value is fixed as a quantity and the account is closed, the co-evolutionary process that generates GRW is interrupted.

This does not mean that all formal agreements in intimate relations are settlement in the destructive sense. The distinction that [Paper XIII](#) drew between the non-binding vow and the sword of legal enforcement is relevant here ([Huang 2026](#)): an agreement that establishes the conditions for co-evolutionary activity without fixing its products is structurally different from an agreement that converts the products of co-evolutionary activity into a settled account. The former supports GRW generation; the latter destroys it.

Commodification: The Reduction of the Other to Exchange Value

Commodification (商品化) is the mechanism by which the relational other—the person with whom one builds a shared life—is reduced to an object with exchange value: a bundle of properties that can be assessed, compared, and traded. Commodification is the intimate relation’s form of Marx’s commodity fetishism: the irreducibly particular other, with their unique history and their specific mode of co-evolutionary participation, is reduced to a set of general, exchangeable properties.

The most explicit forms of commodification in intimate relations are the assessment of potential partners in terms of their economic value (income, assets, earning potential), their reproductive value (fertility, health, genetic endowment), or their social value (family connections, educational credentials, status). Each of these assessments reduces the other to a bundle of properties that can be compared across potential partners, as commodities are compared across markets.

But commodification operates in subtler forms within ongoing intimate relations. When one partner treats the other’s emotional labour as a service to be extracted rather than a co-evolutionary contribution to be received; when the shared life is assessed in terms of its return on investment rather than its co-evolutionary depth; when the other is valued for what they provide rather than for what they are—commodification is operating, even without explicit monetary exchange.

Commodification is destructive of GRW because GRW requires the recognition of the other as a genuine co-subject of the relational field—as someone whose particular, irreducible mode of co-evolutionary participation is constitutive of the field’s dynamics. The commodified other cannot be a genuine co-subject; they are a resource. And resources can be extracted but not co-evolved with.

Indebtedness: The Structural Obligation That Forecloses Generativity

Indebtedness (债务化) is the mechanism by which a structural obligation—a debt that one party owes to another—is introduced into the intimate relational field. Unlike settlement (which closes an account) and commodification (which reduces the other to exchange value), indebtedness keeps the account open—but in a way that is destructive rather than generative.

The paradigmatic form of indebtedness in intimate relations is the bride-price debt: the groom’s family has made a significant material transfer to the bride’s family, and this creates an implicit or explicit obligation on the bride’s part to fulfil the terms of the exchange—to bear children, to maintain the household, to provide the services that the transfer was understood to purchase. The debt is structural: it does not need to be explicitly invoked to shape the relational dynamics; it is built into the founding symbolic structure of the relation.

But indebtedness is not confined to bride-price arrangements. It operates wherever one party’s contribution to the intimate relation—material, emotional, or otherwise—is framed as a loan rather than a gift or a co-evolutionary investment: wherever the implicit message is “I have given you X, and you owe me Y.” This framing is destructive of GRW because it converts co-evolutionary generativity into exchange: the contributor’s investment in the relational field is not received as a contribution to the shared attractor landscape but as a claim on the other’s future behaviour.

The deepest form of indebtedness is not material but existential: the sense that one party owes their very existence, happiness, or security to the other, and that this debt can never be fully repaid. This existential indebtedness—which can arise from material dependency, from asymmetric emotional investment, or from cultural structures that assign one party responsibility for the other’s wellbeing—is perhaps the most powerful destroyer of genuine

co-evolutionary dynamics, because it converts the open, generative space of the intimate relation into a closed system of obligation and repayment.

Three mechanisms of GRW destruction. Settlement, commodification, and indebtedness are three mechanisms by which individualist and mercantilist wealth logic destroys the conditions for GRW generation in intimate relations. Settlement closes the relational account, fixing as a snapshot what is constitutively a process. Commodification reduces the co-subject of the relational field to a bundle of exchangeable properties, foreclosing genuine co-evolutionary participation. Indebtedness converts co-evolutionary generativity into a system of obligation and repayment, replacing the open space of shared becoming with the closed structure of debt.

6.3.3 Social Reproduction and the Invisible Wealth of Care

Federici's analysis of social reproduction (Federici 2004) identifies a further dimension of wealth destruction in intimate relations: the systematic non-recognition of care labour as wealth production. We develop this analysis here in terms of the GRW framework, showing how the non-recognition of care labour is not merely an injustice but a form of GRW destruction.

Care labour—the emotional, attentional, and physical work of maintaining the intimate relational field—is GRW's primary production mechanism. The work of joint attention, of timely sharing, of co-evolutionary receptivity, of the non-possessive participation in the relational field's generative activity that [Paper XIV](#) identified as the practices of relational happiness (Wanhong 2026): all of this is care labour in Federici's sense. It generates GRW—the accumulated attractor landscape of the shared life—but it generates it in a form that is invisible to the dominant wealth frameworks.

This invisibility is not innocent. When care labour is not recognised as wealth production, two consequences follow. First, the care labourer is deprived of the social recognition

and material support that would allow them to sustain and develop their care practice—creating the material conditions under which care labour is degraded and the GRW it generates is depleted. Second, the value generated by care labour is available to be appropriated by the non-caring party without recognition or reciprocity—a form of GRW extraction that is structurally identical to the extraction of surplus value in Marx’s account of capitalist production.

The recognition of care labour as GRW production is therefore both a matter of epistemic justice (recognising what is genuinely there) and a matter of GRW sustainability (ensuring that the conditions for GRW generation are maintained).

6.3.4 The Intergenerational Reproduction of Wealth Structures

Thomas Piketty’s analysis of wealth inequality (Piketty 2014) identifies a structural tendency of capital to reproduce and amplify itself across generations: when the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of economic growth, wealth inequality increases over time, and the advantages of those who begin with wealth compound across generations.

This analysis applies to the intergenerational reproduction of wealth structures in intimate relations. The material wealth that a family brings to the founding of a new intimate relation—the bride-price, the dowry, the parental financial support, the inheritance—shapes the symbolic structure within which the new relation develops. Families with greater material wealth can provide their children with more favourable entry conditions into the intimate relational market; families with less material wealth are constrained in ways that limit their children’s relational possibilities.

But the intergenerational reproduction of wealth structures in intimate relations is not only material. The **symbolic capital** that Bourdieu would call the habitus of relational life—the implicit knowledge of how to navigate intimate relations, the emotional and attentional skills developed in the family of origin, the capacity for co-evolutionary participation that is cultivated or suppressed in childhood—is also reproduced intergenerationally. Children who grow up in relational fields rich in GRW—where care labour is valued, where emotional attunement is practised, where co-evolutionary generativity is the norm—develop the relational capabilities that make GRW generation possible in their own intimate relations. Children who grow up in relational fields organised by settlement,

commodification, and indebtedness develop different habits and expectations.

This intergenerational dimension of relational wealth has a disturbing consequence: the conditions for GRW generation are themselves unequally distributed. The children of relational fields rich in GRW are better equipped to generate GRW in their own relations; the children of relational fields organised by mercantilist logic are more likely to reproduce that logic. This is a form of relational inequality that is invisible to standard measures of wealth distribution but that is, in the long run, perhaps the most consequential form of inequality in human social life.

6.3.5 Contemporary Forms: Consumerism, Human Capital, and Digital Extraction

The mercantilist logic that operates in traditional wealth forms in intimate relations has not disappeared in contemporary societies; it has taken new forms that are in some respects more pervasive and more insidious than the traditional ones, because they operate through cultural norms and technological systems rather than through explicit contractual structures.

Consumerism introduces settlement and commodification into intimate relations through the medium of consumption. The commodification of romantic love—the expectation that love should be expressed through the purchase of goods, that the quality of the relation is measured by the quality of the gifts exchanged, that the anniversary dinner at an expensive restaurant is the proper form of relational celebration—converts the co-evolutionary dynamics of the intimate field into a series of market transactions. The happiness jar, in this cultural environment, is replaced by the receipt: the evidence that the appropriate commodity has been purchased and the relational account has been settled for another year.

Human capital theory, associated with the work of Gary Becker, introduces the language of investment, return, and efficiency into the analysis of intimate relations (Maslow 1954). Partners are assessed as human capital assets; the decision to marry is modelled as an investment decision; the allocation of time between market work and domestic labour is optimised for household income maximisation. This framework imports the full apparatus of commodity exchange logic into the most intimate dimensions of human life, converting the co-subject of the relational field into a bundle of productive capacities to

be assessed and utilised.

Digital platforms have created a new form of relational wealth extraction that is unprecedented in its scale and its invisibility. The data generated by intimate relational activity—the messages, the shared photographs, the location data, the emotional expressions—is harvested by platform companies and converted into advertising revenue. This is a form of GRW extraction: the value generated by co-evolutionary activity in the intimate relational field is captured by an external party without recognition or reciprocity. The platform does not merely observe the intimate relation; it shapes it, through algorithmic design that optimises for engagement rather than for co-evolutionary depth, thereby actively degrading the conditions for GRW generation while extracting the value that the degraded relation still produces.

Contemporary forms of GRW extraction. Contemporary consumerism, human capital theory, and digital platform extraction represent new forms of the mercantilist logic that operates in traditional wealth forms in intimate relations. Each converts the co-evolutionary dynamics of the intimate field into a system of market transactions, reducing the co-subject to a bundle of exchangeable properties and extracting the value generated by relational activity without recognition or reciprocity. The scale and invisibility of digital platform extraction make it perhaps the most significant contemporary threat to GRW generation.

6.4. The Dialectic of Freedom and Wealth in Intimate Relations

The preceding section showed how wealth forms organised by mercantilist and individualist logic destroy the conditions for GRW generation through three mechanisms: settlement, commodification, and indebtedness. This section confronts the dialectical tension that this analysis generates: if traditional wealth forms in intimate relations are structurally destructive of GRW, does it follow that intimate relations should be organised

without material wealth? The answer is unequivocally no—and the reasons for this negative answer are philosophically important.

The core dialectical tension is this: **power-structured occupation of intimate relations through wealth destroys relational freedom; but material poverty equally destroys relational freedom.** Any adequate account of wealth in intimate relations must navigate between these two forms of destruction—must show how material wealth can be organised in ways that support rather than undermine the conditions for GRW generation. This navigation is the task of the present section, which examines four theoretical approaches to the freedom-wealth dialectic before proposing the GRB framework's resolution.

6.4.1 The Liberal Solution: Property Rights as the Foundation of Freedom

The liberal tradition, associated with Locke, Mill, and their successors, holds that freedom requires property: that the individual who lacks secure property rights is vulnerable to domination by those who control the material conditions of their existence, and that the protection of property rights is therefore a precondition for the exercise of genuine freedom (Sen 1999).

Applied to intimate relations, the liberal argument takes the following form: the party who enters an intimate relation without independent material resources is structurally dependent on the other party and therefore structurally unfree. The woman who has no independent income, no property in her own name, and no legal claim to the shared assets of the marriage is not a free participant in the intimate relation; she is a dependent, whose continued participation in the relation is conditioned by the other party's willingness to maintain her. Bride-price, on a liberal reading, can even be defended as a form of property right: it provides the bride's family with material resources that partially compensate for the loss of their daughter's productive contribution, and it establishes a material baseline of security for the new relation.

The liberal solution captures something important: material dependency is a genuine threat to relational freedom, and the protection of individual property rights is a genuine, if partial, remedy. But the liberal solution has a structural limitation that is directly relevant to the GRW framework: it addresses the problem of material dependency by

extending the logic of individual property rights into the intimate relational field, thereby intensifying the individualist logic that is itself one of the primary threats to GRW generation.

The prenuptial agreement is the liberal solution's purest expression in intimate relations: it protects each party's individual property rights by pre-settling the distribution of assets in the event of the relation's dissolution. As §6.3.2 argued, this pre-settlement introduces settlement logic into the founding structure of the relation, creating a symbolic account of the relational value that constrains the co-evolutionary dynamics before they have properly begun. The liberal solution to the problem of material dependency creates a new problem: the juridification of intimate life, the conversion of the co-evolutionary relational field into a contractual arrangement between property-holding individuals.

The liberal paradox. The liberal solution to the problem of material dependency in intimate relations—the extension of individual property rights into the relational field—addresses a genuine threat to relational freedom while intensifying the individualist wealth logic that is itself a primary threat to GRW generation. Property rights protect individuals from dependency; they do not protect the relational field from the settlement, commodification, and indebtedness that individualist wealth logic introduces.

6.4.2 The Marxist Solution: Liberation Through the Abolition of Property Relations

The Marxist tradition holds that the liberal solution addresses the symptom rather than the disease: property rights protect individuals within the existing system of property relations, but they do not challenge the system itself. The genuine solution to the problem of material dependency in intimate relations requires the transformation of the material conditions under which intimate relations are organised—the abolition of the property relations that make some people structurally dependent on others, and the social recognition and material support of the reproductive labour that sustains intimate and family

life (Federici 2004).

Applied concretely to intimate relations, the Marxist solution demands: the socialisation of care labour (through public childcare, eldercare, and household support); the recognition of emotional and reproductive labour as socially productive work deserving material compensation; and the elimination of the material dependency that makes one party structurally vulnerable to the other's wealth and power.

The Marxist solution is more radical than the liberal one and addresses a deeper level of the problem. By targeting the material conditions rather than the individual's legal position, it aims to transform the structural environment within which intimate relations unfold rather than merely adjusting the terms of the existing arrangement. The GRW framework is in substantial agreement with the Marxist diagnosis: the material conditions of intimate life—the distribution of care work, the recognition of reproductive labour, the material security of all parties—are genuine prerequisites for GRW generation, and their transformation is a political task of the first importance.

But the Marxist solution, like the liberal one, remains limited by a presupposition that the GRW framework challenges: the presupposition that the primary subject of flourishing is the individual (or, in the collective Marxist version, the class). The Marxist solution aims to liberate individuals from material dependency; it does not yet have the ontological resources to articulate the conditions for the flourishing of the relational field itself. The abolition of property relations would remove one major obstacle to GRW generation; it would not, by itself, generate GRW.

6.4.3 Sen's Solution: Capabilities as the Measure of Relational Freedom

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach offers a more nuanced framework for thinking about freedom in intimate relations (Sen 1999). For Sen, freedom is not the absence of material dependency (the liberal conception) nor the abolition of property relations (the Marxist conception) but the expansion of capabilities—the real freedoms that people have to live lives they have reason to value. The measure of relational freedom, on this account, is not the distribution of property rights but the capabilities of each party: their capacity to exit unsatisfactory relations, to contribute their full selves to the relational field, to pursue their own conceptions of the good life within and alongside the intimate relation.

The capabilities approach resonates with the GRW framework at several points. Its insistence that material wealth is instrumentally rather than intrinsically valuable—that what matters is what wealth enables people to do and be, not the wealth itself—supports the GRW framework’s claim that material wealth in intimate relations matters not in itself but as a condition for GRW generation. Its attention to the specific capabilities that matter for relational flourishing—the capacity for exit, for self-expression, for genuine participation—corresponds to what the GRW framework calls the conditions for co-evolutionary participation.

Martha Nussbaum’s extension of the capabilities approach is particularly relevant (Held 2006). Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities includes not only material capabilities (bodily health, bodily integrity, the ability to control one’s environment) but capabilities that are constitutively relational: the capability for affiliation (being able to live with and toward others, to have the social bases of self-respect), the capability for play, and the capability for emotional development. These relational capabilities are the substrate of GRW generation: they are what makes genuine co-evolutionary participation possible, and their development is itself a form of relational wealth.

The GRW framework extends the capabilities approach in a crucial direction: it insists that the capabilities relevant to intimate relational flourishing are not only individual capabilities but **relational capabilities**—capabilities that belong to the relational field itself, that are jointly held and jointly developed, and whose expansion constitutes relational flourishing irreducible to the sum of individual capability expansions. The capability for joint attention, for timely sharing, for co-evolutionary receptivity: these are relational capabilities in this sense, and their development is GRW generation.

6.4.4 The GRB Resolution: Relational Freedom Requires Relational Wealth

The GRB framework proposes a resolution to the freedom-wealth dialectic that draws on all three preceding approaches while going beyond each.

The resolution begins with an acknowledgement that the preceding section may have obscured: **material wealth is a necessary condition for GRW generation**. This is not a concession to the mercantilist view but a straightforward empirical observation: intimate relations that are under severe material stress—characterised by poverty, insecurity,

and the constant pressure of material survival—cannot sustain the quality of co-present attention, timely sharing, and co-evolutionary receptivity that GRW generation requires. Poverty does not merely deprive the parties of material goods; it degrades the relational field itself, raising the threshold for co-evolutionary engagement and depleting the attentional and emotional resources that GRW generation requires.

This means that the political project of securing the material conditions for intimate relational flourishing—the recognition and compensation of care labour, the provision of material security for all parties, the elimination of the structural dependencies that make one party vulnerable to the other’s material power—is not an alternative to the project of GRW generation but its prerequisite. Without adequate material conditions, GRW cannot be generated; the political economy of intimate relations cannot be separated from the political economy of social reproduction.

But material wealth, as the analysis of §6.3 showed, is not sufficient for GRW generation and can actively undermine it when organised according to mercantilist logic. The sufficient condition for GRW generation is not material wealth per se but **relational wealth**: the accumulated attractor landscape of a shared life, built through the co-evolutionary dynamics of joint attention, timely sharing, and non-possessive participation in the relational field’s generative activity.

The GRB resolution therefore takes the following form:

Material wealth (the necessary condition, the secondary aspect of the dialectical contradiction) provides the foundation without which relational flourishing is impossible. It must be sufficient—adequate to remove the material stresses that degrade co-evolutionary dynamics—but it is not itself the goal.

Relational wealth (GRW, the primary aspect of the dialectical contradiction) is the goal: the accumulated product of co-evolutionary activity in the intimate relational field, inexhaustible in the taking and augmented by use, belonging to the *between* rather than to either party.

The dialectical relation between material wealth and GRW is one of necessary but asymmetric dependence: GRW cannot be generated without adequate material conditions (the

secondary aspect is necessary); but adequate material conditions do not automatically generate GRW (the primary aspect is not reducible to the secondary). The practical task is to organise material wealth in ways that provide the necessary conditions for GRW generation without introducing the settlement, commodification, and indebtedness that destroy those conditions.

The GRB resolution of the freedom-wealth dialectic. Relational freedom in intimate relations requires both material wealth (as necessary condition) and relational wealth (as primary form of flourishing). Material wealth organised according to mercantilist logic destroys relational freedom by introducing settlement, commodification, and indebtedness into the relational field. Material poverty equally destroys relational freedom by degrading the conditions for co-evolutionary participation. The resolution requires organising material wealth as a condition for GRW generation rather than as a substitute for it: sufficient to remove material stress from the relational field, but structured so as not to introduce the individualising mechanisms that foreclose co-evolutionary dynamics.

6.4.5 The Practical Shape of the Resolution

The theoretical resolution of the freedom-wealth dialectic takes a concrete shape in the practices of intimate relational life. Several practical implications follow directly from the analysis.

The threshold principle: Material wealth in intimate relations should be organised to meet a threshold—sufficient to remove material stress from the relational field—rather than to maximise accumulation. Above the threshold, additional material wealth does not generate additional GRW and may actively undermine it by introducing the accumulation logic that is structurally alien to co-evolutionary dynamics.

The non-settlement principle: Material arrangements in intimate relations should

be structured as conditions for co-evolutionary activity rather than as settlements of its products. The question to ask of any material arrangement is not “does this fairly distribute what we have created together?” but “does this create the conditions under which we can continue to create together?”

The recognition principle: The care labour and emotional labour that generate GRW should be recognised—materially, socially, and symbolically—as the primary form of wealth production in intimate relations. This recognition is not merely a matter of justice (though it is that); it is a condition for the sustainability of GRW generation.

The non-possessive principle: Material wealth in intimate relations should be organised according to the Daoist ethic of *xuande*—生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰—to the extent that the material conditions allow. The accumulation of material wealth as a form of power over the other, as a guarantee of the other’s continued participation in the relation, or as a compensation for the absence of GRW, is the clearest expression of the mercantilist logic that the GRW framework opposes.

With this resolution of the freedom-wealth dialectic in place, we are ready to develop the concept of GRW in full theoretical detail. The next section undertakes that development, moving from the preliminary characterisation of GRW as the primary form of wealth in intimate relations to a formal account of its structure, its generation, and its dynamics.

6.5. Generative Relational Wealth: Theoretical Construction

The preceding sections have prepared the ground for the central theoretical contribution of this paper. We have surveyed the major traditions of wealth theory and identified their shared individualist presupposition (§6.2); we have shown how wealth forms organised by mercantilist logic destroy the conditions for relational co-evolution through three specific mechanisms (§6.3); and we have proposed a resolution of the freedom-wealth dialectic that places GRW at the centre of intimate relational flourishing (§6.4). We are now in a position to develop the concept of Generative Relational Wealth in full theoretical detail.

The development proceeds through ten stages: the preliminary negative definition, the gift paradigm, the generative justice grounding, the Daoist ethical foundation, the formal

positive definition, the four essential features, the comparison with other wealth forms, the philosophical foundations, the self-generating structure, and finally—the paper’s most original formal contribution—the analysis of GRW’s inexhaustibility through the concept of the relational structural remainder.

6.5.1 The Preliminary Negative Definition: What GRW Is Not

The most useful initial approach to GRW is negative: GRW is not any of the forms of wealth that the preceding survey has identified. This *via negativa* is not merely rhetorical; it is a precise philosophical move, because the forms of wealth that GRW is not are precisely the forms that the major wealth theories have described, and the differences are precisely where those theories fall short of the intimate relational field.

GRW is **not accumulative**: it does not grow by adding discrete units to a stock. The happiness jar does not contain a countable number of happiness-units; the shared attractor landscape of a life built together is not a sum of individual good moments. GRW grows through structural modification of the relational field—through the deepening of attractor basins, the strengthening of coupling, the expansion of the shared phase space—and this structural modification is not additive in any straightforward sense.

GRW is **not settleable**: its value cannot be fixed as a quantity and closed as an account. Every attempt to settle GRW—to say “this is what our relation is worth, this is what I am owed, this is what has been paid”—is an attempt to convert a living process into a frozen snapshot, which kills the process in the act of capturing it.

GRW is **not individually possessable**: it cannot be owned by either party to the relation. The shared attractor landscape of a life together belongs to the *between*; it is held by the relational field, not by the individuals who compose it. This does not mean that the individuals do not benefit from GRW—they do, profoundly—but the benefit is not ownership. GRW is more like the air in a shared space than like the money in a wallet: both parties breathe it, both parties need it, but neither can take their share and leave.

6.5.2 The Gift Paradigm: GRW as More Radically Relational Than the Gift

Mauss's gift economy, as §6.2.5 noted, is the existing wealth theory that comes closest to GRW (Mauss 1990). Gift wealth is essentially relational—its value is constituted by the social bonds it creates—and it cannot simply be accumulated without ceasing to be a gift. In Paper IX, the gift was identified as the unique material object that simultaneously inhabits all three registers: the imaginary (as the idealised expression of the giver's feeling), the symbolic (as the socially sanctioned form of relational expression), and the real (as the material trace of the giving act that cannot be fully symbolised) (Huang 2025).

The gift paradigm illuminates GRW by showing what it would mean for wealth to be constitutively relational rather than individually held. But GRW goes beyond the gift in a crucial respect that deserves careful attention: **the gift can be given; GRW can only be generated together.**

Consider what this means. A gift is produced by one party (the giver), transferred to another (the receiver), and becomes the receiver's property. Even in Mauss's account, where the gift creates obligations of reciprocity and the exchange of gifts creates social bonds, the gift itself is a discrete object that passes from one party to another. GRW cannot pass from one party to another because it was never in one party to begin with. It arises in the *between*—in the shared attentional field, the joint trajectory through the relational phase space, the coupled attractor dynamics—and it belongs to the *between* in a constitutive rather than a contingent sense.

This means that GRW cannot be given as an expression of love, generosity, or commitment. It can only be **generated**—generated together, through the co-evolutionary dynamics that the practices of relational attentiveness make possible. The lover who tries to give their beloved GRW has misunderstood both the gift and the wealth: what they can give is the conditions for GRW generation (time, presence, attentiveness, non-possessive participation), but the GRW itself arises from the relational field in response to these conditions, not from either party individually.

6.5.3 Generative Justice and the Return of Value to the Field

Eglash’s generative justice framework (Eglash 2016) provides the ethical grounding for GRW: the principle that value should be returned to those who generate it. Applied to intimate relations, this principle takes a distinctive form: since GRW is generated by the relational field itself—by the co-evolutionary dynamics of joint attention, timely sharing, and mutual structural modification—the value it generates should be returned to the relational field rather than extracted by either party individually.

This is not merely a principle of fair distribution but a principle of GRW sustainability: value extracted from the relational field without return depletes the field’s generative capacity, degrading the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate GRW and eventually destroying the conditions for GRW generation altogether. The extraction of relational value—through the appropriation of emotional labour, the commodification of shared experience, the conversion of co-evolutionary achievements into individual social capital—is not merely unjust; it is self-defeating, because it destroys the source of the value being extracted.

The generative justice principle applied to GRW has a specific practical content: **no party should be reduced to a generator of relational value for the other’s benefit**. This is what Paper IX called the evil cycle in its intimate relational form (Huang 2025): one party’s generative capacity is used as fuel for the other’s accumulation, with nothing returned to sustain the generator’s generative capacity. The evil cycle is not merely unjust; it is unstable, because the generator’s capacity is finite and their depletion eventually destroys the source of the extractor’s benefit.

6.5.4 Non-Possessive Wealth: *Xuande* as the Ethical Foundation of GRW

The Daoist concept of *xuande* (玄德)—the dark virtue: 生而不有, 为而不恃, 长而不宰—provides the ethical foundation for the GRW framework (Laozi 1963). To generate without possessing, to act without presuming on the result, to foster without ruling: this is not a counsel of indifference or passivity but a description of the highest form of productive activity—the activity that generates most richly precisely because it does not grasp at what it generates.

Xuande is the relational ethic of GRW generation: the orientation that allows the relational field to be what it is, that does not grasp at the happiness that arises in it but receives it with gratitude and lets it pass, that does not try to hold the flower beyond its moment but attends to the root that makes it possible. The party who practises *xuande* in intimate life does not try to accumulate GRW as individual property; they participate in the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate it, receive what arises from the *between* as a gift of the field’s generativity, and return it to the field through continued non-possessive participation.

The connection between *xuande* and GRW sustainability is not merely ethical but dynamical. In the formal language of Paper XIV (Wanhong 2026): the party who tries to possess GRW—who claims the shared attractor landscape as their individual property, who uses the accumulated holonomy of the shared life as leverage in relational power struggles, who converts the field’s generativity into individual social capital—is thereby raising the threshold for relational spikes, reducing the coupling coefficient of the relational system, and accelerating the degradation of the shared attractor landscape. Possession destroys the possessed.

6.5.5 The Formal Positive Definition of GRW

With the negative definition, the gift paradigm, the generative justice grounding, and the Daoist ethical foundation in place, we can now state the formal positive definition of GRW.

Formal definition of GRW. Generative Relational Wealth ($\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$) is the accumulated structural modification of the relational attractor landscape produced by co-evolutionary activity in the intimate relational field. It is characterised by:

1. **Relational substrate:** $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ is stored in the geometry of the relational field—in the depth of shared attractor basins, the strength of coupling, the richness of the shared phase space—rather than in any material or symbolic medium.
2. **Co-evolutionary origin:** $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ is generated exclusively through the joint trajectory

of the coupled relational system through its phase space; it cannot be produced by either party individually.

3. **Non-depletion under use:** Use of $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ (through memory, re-traversal, artistic processing) does not diminish the structural modifications that constitute it; re-traversal may produce additional holonomy, thereby augmenting $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$.
4. **Non-possessability:** $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ cannot be owned by either party; it is held by the relational field and accessible only through co-present participation in the field’s dynamics.

$\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ is the self-fuel of the relational field: generated through co-evolution, it becomes the dynamic condition for further co-evolution, constituting the generative relational cycle whose positive holonomy accumulation is the formal content of relational flourishing.

6.5.6 The Four Essential Features of GRW

The formal definition entails four essential features of GRW that distinguish it from all other wealth forms. Each feature has both a formal content (derivable from the dynamical systems framework of [Paper XIV](#)) and a phenomenological correlate (identifiable in the lived experience of intimate relational life).

Irreducibility (不可还原性): GRW cannot be decomposed into individual contributions or individual shares. The shared attractor landscape of a life built together is not the sum of each party’s individual contributions; it is an emergent property of the coupled dynamical system, arising at the level of the system and not reducible to the level of its components. Formally: the attractor $\mathcal{A}_{\text{rel}}$ of the coupled system is not in the product of the individual attractors $\mathcal{A}_1 \times \mathcal{A}_2$. Phenomenologically: the happiness of the shared moment cannot be divided—“my half of the happiness” is not a coherent concept.

Non-depletion under use (使用不消耗): Re-traversal of GRW—through memory, re-reading of shared journals, viewing of shared photographs, return to shared places, artistic processing of shared experience—does not diminish the structural modifications that

constitute GRW. This is the feature that most strikingly distinguishes GRW from all material wealth forms: use does not deplete but may augment. Formally: re-traversal of the relational phase space accumulates additional holonomy, which constitutes additional structural modification of the relational attractor landscape. Phenomenologically: the couple who revisits a shared memory does not thereby exhaust it; the memory is, if anything, richer for having been revisited.

Generative accumulation (生成性积累): GRW grows through co-evolutionary activity, not through extraction or exchange. Its accumulation is not the result of one party giving something to the other (extraction from one's resources to supplement the other's) but of both parties jointly traversing the relational phase space in ways that produce new structural modifications. Formally: $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}(t) = \int_0^t \delta \mathcal{A}_{\text{rel}}(\tau) d\tau$, where $\delta \mathcal{A}_{\text{rel}}$ is the infinitesimal structural modification produced at each moment by the coupled co-evolutionary dynamics. Phenomenologically: GRW does not feel like something one party gives and the other receives; it feels like something that arises from the *between*, jointly and without individual authorship.

Non-possessability (不可占有性): GRW cannot be owned by either party. Any attempt to possess GRW—to claim the shared attractor landscape as individual property, to use the accumulated holonomy of the shared life as leverage in relational power struggles—destroys the GRW it attempts to possess, because possession converts the co-evolutionary dynamic into a possessive one, raising the threshold for relational spikes and reducing the coupling coefficient of the system. Formally: the operator of individual possession $\hat{P}_i$ applied to $\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}$ yields $\hat{P}_i(\mathcal{W}_{\text{rel}}) = 0$ —possession annihilates what it attempts to capture. Phenomenologically: the moment one tries to hold the shared happiness as one's own, it begins to slip away.

6.5.7 Comparison with Other Wealth Forms

The four essential features of GRW allow a systematic comparison with the major wealth forms identified in §6.2:

	Material	Gift	Capability	C
Accumulation mechanism	Extraction/exchange	Giving/receiving	Individual development	C
Effect of use	Depletion	Transfer/flow	Enhancement	N
Primary subject	Individual	Social bond	Individual	R
Possessable?	Yes	Partially	Yes	N
Settleable?	Yes	Partially	Yes	N
Externally verifiable?	Yes	Partially	Yes	N

The table reveals the systematic difference between GRW and all other wealth forms: GRW is the only form of wealth whose accumulation mechanism is co-evolution, whose use does not deplete, whose primary subject is the relational field rather than the individual, and which is neither possessable, settleable, nor externally verifiable. These features are not incidental but essential: they follow directly from the relational ontology that grounds the GRW concept.

6.5.8 The Self-Generating Structure of GRW

The most philosophically important feature of GRW is its self-generating structure—the feature that the paper’s epigraph invokes with the Daoist phrase 取之不尽，用之不竭: inexhaustible in the taking, inexhaustible in the using.

The self-generating structure is this: GRW is generated by co-evolutionary activity; co-evolutionary activity is supported and deepened by GRW; therefore GRW supports its own generation. The generative relational cycle is self-sustaining because its fuel—GRW—is produced by the same activity that it fuels.

More precisely: the shared attractor landscape produced by past co-evolutionary activity lowers the threshold for future co-evolutionary engagement (by deepening the coupling, expanding the shared phase space, and increasing the relational field’s sensitivity to contingent events); the lowered threshold makes future co-evolutionary activity more

frequent and more generative; the more frequent and more generative co-evolutionary activity produces deeper structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape; and so on. GRW generates the conditions for its own augmentation.

This self-generating structure is what distinguishes the good relational cycle from the bad one in the terms of [Paper IX](#) (Huang 2025). The good cycle is characterised by positive holonomy accumulation: each traversal of the relational cycle returns to a point that carries the accumulated phase of all previous traversals, making the next traversal richer than the last. The bad cycle is characterised by zero or negative holonomy: each traversal returns to the same point or a diminished one, producing neither growth nor deepening. GRW is the accumulated positive holonomy of the good cycle: it is what makes the cycle spiral rather than merely circle.

6.5.9 The Structural Remainder: Why GRW Is Inexhaustible

The claim that GRW is inexhaustible under use requires a more precise account. Why does re-traversal of the relational phase space not deplete the structural modifications that constitute GRW? This question is not trivial: in ordinary dynamical systems, repeated traversal of the same trajectory tends to produce diminishing returns as the system's response habituates to the familiar stimulus.

The answer lies in what we call the **structural remainder**: the non-zero difference between the structural modification produced by the original traversal and the structural modification produced by the re-traversal. This remainder exists because no two traversals of the relational phase space are identical: the re-traversal occurs in a different context (different attractor landscape, different coupling state, different individual states of the two parties) from the original traversal, and the structural modification it produces is therefore different from the original modification. The difference is the structural remainder.

Formally: let x denote the original traversal and $O(x)$ denote the re-traversal (processed through the operator O of memory, artistic processing, or creative re-engagement). The structural remainder is:

$$\mathcal{R}(O(x), x) \neq 0$$

This non-zero remainder is the source of GRW’s inexhaustibility. Each re-traversal produces a structural modification that is not identical to the original—that carries new information about the relational field’s current state, the current context, and the current mode of co-evolutionary engagement. The happiness jar does not deplete because each act of taking from it is also an act of adding to it: the re-traversal that constitutes the taking also constitutes a new structural modification that enriches the landscape from which the next taking will occur.

Open question. **The origin of the operator O .** The structural remainder argument presupposes that the operator O is non-trivial—that it transforms the original traversal x into something genuinely different rather than merely reproducing it. Where does the operator O come from? Is it freely chosen by the parties? Is it partially determined by the relational field’s current state? Is it jointly constrained by all three registers—the imaginary (the idealised memory of the original experience), the symbolic (the cultural and linguistic resources available for re-engagement), and the real (the irreducible particularity of the original experience that exceeds all symbolisation)? These questions are currently open; §6.6 develops the partial answer that semiotics and psychoanalytic theory can provide.

6.5.10 Advantages, Value, and Honest Limitations

GRW has several advantages over material wealth forms as the organising principle of intimate relational flourishing.

Crisis resilience: GRW is not subject to the material vulnerabilities that threaten material wealth—inflation, market fluctuations, theft, physical deterioration. The shared attractor landscape of a life built together is not destroyed by economic crisis; if any-

thing, shared adversity, navigated together through the co-evolutionary receptivity that [Paper XIV](#) described (Wanhong 2026), can deepen the attractor landscape and augment GRW. This is the formal content of the phenomenological observation that the deepest intimacies are often forged in adversity rather than in prosperity.

Self-augmentation: Unlike material wealth, which depletes under use, GRW augments under the right kind of use. The couple who revisits shared memories, who processes shared experience through artistic creation, who re-traverses the relational phase space through co-present engagement, does not thereby exhaust their GRW; they augment it. This self-augmenting property makes GRW the only form of wealth that becomes more valuable the more it is used—a property that has no analogue in any material wealth theory.

Non-zero-sum: GRW generation is not a competition. One party's generation of GRW does not diminish the other's; both parties are enriched by each co-evolutionary event, and the enrichment of one is the enrichment of the relational field that both inhabit. This non-zero-sum character is what makes the GRW framework fundamentally different from mercantilist logic: in the domain of GRW, there is no trade-off between individual benefit and shared benefit.

These advantages must be stated alongside an equally honest acknowledgement of GRW's **limitations**.

Material dependency: GRW cannot be generated without adequate material conditions. Severe material stress—poverty, insecurity, the constant pressure of survival—raises the threshold for co-evolutionary engagement and depletes the attentional and emotional resources that GRW generation requires. GRW is not a substitute for material wealth; it is a complement to it, possible only when the material conditions are sufficient.

Epistemic opacity: GRW is not externally verifiable, not settleable, and not individually possessable. This epistemic opacity creates genuine practical difficulties: it makes GRW invisible to the legal, economic, and social systems that organise material wealth; it makes it difficult for the parties themselves to assess the state of their relational field's GRW; and it makes GRW vulnerable to the epistemic injustices analysed in §6.12—the systematic misrecognition or denial of GRW by one party to the other.

Vulnerability to destruction: GRW, for all its self-augmenting properties, can be destroyed. Sustained betrayal, the systematic application of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness, or the radical asymmetry of co-evolutionary participation (where one party bears all the costs of generating GRW while the other extracts all the benefits) can deplete the relational field’s structural modifications and destroy the conditions for further GRW generation. The good cycle, if sufficiently disrupted, can become the bad cycle; the spiral can collapse into the circle or the downward spiral.

6.5.11 The Happiness Jar: GRW in Practice

The abstract theoretical account of GRW finds its most accessible concrete realisation in what we call the **happiness jar** (幸福储蓄罐): a practice in which intimate partners record moments of shared happiness—the flower noticed on a path, the evening of wordless co-presence, the unexpected discovery of a shared delight—and return to these records at moments when the relational field is under stress, depleted, or in danger of collapsing into the bad cycle.

The happiness jar is a thought experiment as much as a literal practice: it need not involve a physical jar or written records (though these are perfectly legitimate realisations). What it names is the general practice of **intentional GRW re-traversal**: the deliberate return to the traces of past co-evolutionary events as a means of reactivating the co-evolutionary dynamics of the relational field when those dynamics have been weakened by stress, habituation, or the accumulation of unshared contingency.

Why the jar works: the mechanism of re-traversal. When the couple returns to the traces of a past co-evolutionary event—reading an old message, viewing a shared photograph, returning to a place where something significant happened, or processing the shared experience through artistic creation—they are not merely recalling a memory. They are re-traversing the relational phase space in the vicinity of the original event, producing a structural modification that is similar to but not identical with the original. The non-zero remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x)$ ensures that the re-traversal produces new GRW rather than merely restoring the old; the happiness jar is not a savings account from which withdrawals deplete the balance but a garden that grows when tended.

Artistic processing as high-fidelity re-traversal. Among the various forms that

GRW re-traversal can take, artistic processing occupies a special position. When shared experience is processed into a poem, a painting, a piece of music, a story, or any other form of artistic expression, the processing act is simultaneously a re-traversal (engaging with the original experience) and a structural transformation (producing a new symbolic object that carries the experience's topological structure in a new form). The artistic product is a high-fidelity record of the relational phase space trajectory that generated it—not a literal reproduction of the experience but a structural analogue of it, preserving the experience's dynamical form while transforming its content. This high-fidelity record supports particularly rich re-traversals: each engagement with the artistic product is a new traversal of the relational phase space, producing new holonomy and augmenting GRW.

Why the jar can reignite a withering cycle. The happiness jar is most important not in moments of relational richness but in moments of relational stress—when the cycle has become thin, when the coupling has weakened, when the shared attractor landscape has been depleted by the accumulation of unshared contingency or the sustained application of settlement logic. In these moments, the happiness jar offers a means of reintroducing positive holonomy into the relational system: a way of re-establishing contact with the richer relational field that existed before the depletion, and of using that contact to reactivate the co-evolutionary dynamics that can restore and deepen the field.

The mechanism by which re-traversal reignites a withering cycle is analysed in detail in §6.6, which examines the symbolic structure of the happiness jar and the psychoanalytic dynamics of GRW re-traversal. The short answer, which the semiotics section will develop formally, is that the operator $O(x)$ —the artistic processing or intentional re-engagement with the trace of a past co-evolutionary event—produces a new symbolic structure x' that stands in a non-trivial relation $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ to the original. This relation, when it genuinely engages the relational field rather than merely reproducing the original symbolisation, opens a new interval between the symbolic and the real—the Δ that is the source of relational drive (*Trieb*) and the condition for continued co-evolutionary generativity.

6.6. The Semiotics of the Happiness Jar: Trace, Projection, and Poetic Suture

The previous section introduced the happiness jar as the paradigmatic practice of GRW re-traversal and identified the structural remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x) \neq 0$ as the formal basis of GRW's inexhaustibility. It deferred the question of how, precisely, the operator O works—what kind of symbolic operation artistic processing is, and why it can reignite a withering relational cycle. This section addresses that question from multiple angles: semiotics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and theoretical physics. The convergence of these frameworks on a single structural insight is itself philosophically significant.

The central tension that the section must resolve is this: GRW is, by definition, a phenomenon of the real register—it is stored in the structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape, irreducible to any symbolic representation. Yet the happiness jar is an essentially symbolic practice: it involves recording (converting experience into symbols), processing (transforming symbols into new symbols), and re-engaging (reading symbols to re-access experience). If GRW is real and the happiness jar is symbolic, how can the symbolic practice access and augment the real wealth?

The answer, we will argue, is that the symbolic practice does not directly access the real; rather, it constructs a relation between two symbolic structures— x and $x' = O(x)$ —and it is this **relation between relations** that makes contact with the real possible. The symbolic practice creates a structural interval that resonates with the real's relational structure, and this resonance—not representation—is the mechanism by which the happiness jar works.

6.6.1 The Core Paradox: Symbolising the Unsymbolisable

We begin by stating the paradox with precision. GRW is constitutively not fully symbolisable: it is stored in the geometry of the relational field, in the depth of shared attractor basins, in the accumulated holonomy of co-evolutionary trajectories. None of these can be fully captured in any symbolic record. The photograph of the flower on the path does not contain the quality of shared attention that made noticing the flower a relational event; the diary entry does not contain the warmth of the co-present moment it describes; the

poem does not contain the particular texture of the shared experience it evokes.

And yet the photograph, the diary entry, and the poem are not meaningless with respect to the GRW they partially record. They are not representations that succeed or fail at capturing the original experience; they are something more interesting and more functional. To understand what they are, we must examine the semiotic categories available to us.

6.6.2 The Record as Index: Trace Rather Than Representation

Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite classification of signs—icon (resemblance), symbol (convention), index (causal or existential connection)—provides the first essential tool (Peirce 1931). Of the three sign types, the index is the most directly relevant to the happiness jar's records.

An index is a sign that is connected to its object not by resemblance (like an icon) or by convention (like a symbol) but by a real, existential connection: the smoke that indexes fire, the footprint that indexes the passing animal, the photograph that indexes the light that existed when the shutter opened. The index does not *resemble* its object; it is *caused by* it, or *continuous with* it, or *a trace of* it.

The records in the happiness jar are indices in this precise sense: they are traces of the co-evolutionary events that generated them. The diary entry was written in the aftermath of the shared moment; the photograph was taken in its midst; the poem was composed in the presence of the experience it evokes. Each record carries an existential connection to the co-evolutionary event that produced it—not a resemblance to it, not a conventional representation of it, but a genuine causal trace.

This indexical character is what makes the happiness jar records valuable in a way that mere descriptions would not be. A description of a co-evolutionary event—"we saw a beautiful flower and felt happy together"—is a symbolic sign: it conveys propositional content about the event but has no existential connection to it. The index, by contrast, carries the event's trace within itself: the photograph's grain is continuous with the light of that moment; the diary entry's handwriting is continuous with the emotional state of the writer at that time. When the couple re-engages with the index, they are not reading

a description of the past event; they are touching the trace of it—the existential thread that connects the present moment to the past co-evolutionary event.

The record as index. The records in the happiness jar are indices rather than representations: they are existential traces of the co-evolutionary events that generated them, carrying a real connection to those events that symbolic descriptions do not carry. This indexical character is what makes re-engagement with the records a genuine re-traversal of the relational phase space rather than a merely cognitive recall of past events.

6.6.3 Artistic Processing as Topological Projection

The simple record—the photograph, the diary entry—is an index. But artistic processing produces something more complex: a new symbolic object $x' = O(x)$ that stands in a specific relation to the original record x and, through x , to the original co-evolutionary event. What kind of sign is x' ?

x' is not an index of the original event in the same sense as x : it was not produced in the moment of the event but at a later time, through a deliberate creative act. Nor is it simply an icon (a resemblance) or a symbol (a convention). It is something more specific: a **topological projection** of the original event's structural dynamics.

By topological projection, we mean the following. The original co-evolutionary event had a specific trajectory in the relational phase space: a specific path through the space of joint attentional states, emotional registers, and bodily dispositions. This trajectory has a topological structure—it has curvature, it produces holonomy, it creates specific attractors in the phase space. A topological projection preserves this structure while transforming the content: it maps the original trajectory into a new medium (words, images, music, movement) in a way that retains the trajectory's topological properties while changing its material realisation.

Walter Benjamin's concept of *Aura*—the unique, irreplaceable quality of an original work

of art that is tied to its specific location in space and time, and that cannot be reproduced through mechanical means (Benjamin 1968)—captures something of what we mean by topological projection. The artistic processing of a shared experience produces a work that carries the *Aura* of the original event: not as a copy of the event but as a unique witness to it, a record of its topological structure in a new material form. The work cannot be reproduced because it is indexed to the specific trajectory of the co-evolutionary event that generated it; no other trajectory could have produced exactly this work.

6.6.4 Poetic Suture: Anchoring Without Closing

Lacanian psychoanalysis introduces the concept of the *point de capiton* (quilting point or suture point): the master signifier that arrests the endless sliding of the signifying chain and produces a temporary fixation of meaning (Lacan 2006). Without suture points, meaning slides indefinitely; with them, it is anchored—temporarily, locally, revocably—to a specific position in the symbolic order.

The happiness jar's records function as suture points, but of a specific kind: what we call **poetic suture points**, to distinguish them from the strong, settlement-producing suture points of the dominant symbolic order.

An ordinary suture point—a name, a price, a legal status—is a strong suture: it arrests the sliding of meaning decisively, producing a fixed, stable, and often irreversible closure. The price of the flower is n units of currency: the meaning of the flower, in the market context, is definitively settled. This strong suture is precisely what the happiness jar must not produce: if the record of a shared co-evolutionary event becomes a strong suture point—a definitive statement of what that event meant, how happy it made us, what it says about our relationship—it kills the event's generative potential by closing off the interpretive possibilities that make re-traversal rich.

The poetic suture point, by contrast, anchors without closing: it gives the signifying chain a temporary resting point, a place to gather and orient, without arresting its movement definitively. The poem about the flower anchors the memory of the flower—gives it a specific form, a specific emotional register, a specific set of associations—without exhausting the flower's meaning. Each re-reading of the poem is a new traversal of the relational phase space in the vicinity of the original event, producing new interpretive possibilities

and new structural modifications.

This is the semiotic content of what Paper IX called the poetic paradigm (Huang 2025): poetry is the paradigmatic form of good cycle generation because it is constitutively a poetic suture—it anchors meaning without closing it, refuses the settlement that strong suture produces, and generates interpretive cycles that spiral rather than circle. The happiness jar’s artistic products are good because they are poetic in this technical sense: they create suture points that invite re-traversal rather than demanding closure.

6.6.5 The Relation $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$: Between Relations, Not Between Points

We are now in a position to give a more precise account of $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ —the structural remainder that is the source of GRW’s inexhaustibility. The key insight, which the preceding analysis has prepared, is that $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ is not a relation between two points (the original record x and the processed version x') but a **relation between two relations**: the relation of x to the original co-evolutionary event, and the relation of x' to the same event.

x is an index of the original event: it stands in a real, causal, existential relation to that event. Call this relation r_x .

$x' = O(x)$ is a topological projection of the original event: it stands in a structural, analogical relation to the event, preserving its topological dynamics while transforming its material form. Call this relation $r_{x'}$.

$\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ is the relation between r_x and $r_{x'}$: the structural difference between the two relations to the same event. This is not a relation between two symbolic objects but a relation at a higher level of abstraction—a meta-relation, a relation of relations.

It is this meta-relational structure that makes contact with the real possible without direct representation. Neither x nor x' represents the original co-evolutionary event; both stand in specific relations to it. The meta-relation $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ captures the structure of these two different approaches to the same event—the indexical approach of the record and the topological approach of the artistic processing—and it is the **difference** between these two approaches that opens a window onto the real.

The real, on the GRW account, is not a hidden object behind the symbolic; it is the **inexhaustible relational structure** of the co-evolutionary event—the aspect of the event that no symbolic approach can fully capture. $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ makes this inexhaustibility visible by showing that two different symbolic approaches to the same event are not equivalent: there is always a remainder, a gap, a structural difference between the indexical approach and the topological approach, and this gap is the real’s way of showing itself without being fully symbolised.

The meta-relational structure of $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$. $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ is not a relation between two symbolic objects but a relation between two relations to the same real co-evolutionary event: the indexical relation of the record x to the event, and the topological relation of the artistic processing x' to the event. The non-zero remainder $\mathcal{R}(x, x') \neq 0$ follows from the structural difference between these two approaches, and it is this remainder that makes contact with the real possible without direct representation. GRW is inexhaustible because the real is inexhaustible: no finite number of symbolic approaches to the same co-evolutionary event can exhaust its structural content.

6.6.6 Δ and the Drive: Why the Withering Cycle Is Reignited

We are now in a position to address the question deferred from §6.5.11: why can artistic processing reignite a withering relational cycle? The answer draws on Lacanian drive theory, refracted through the relational ontology of the GRB framework.

In the Lacanian framework, the drive (*Trieb*) is distinct from desire (*désir*). Desire is directed toward an absent object—the *objet petit a*—and is constitutively unsatisfied: its structure is the structure of lack, the perpetual pursuit of what cannot be attained. The drive, by contrast, is not directed toward any object; it finds its satisfaction in the circuit itself, in the movement around the *rim*—the edge, the boundary, the interval that the drive circles without ever crossing (Lacan 2006).

The withering relational cycle is a cycle in which the drive has lost its rim. When the relational field is depleted—when the shared attractor landscape has been degraded by stress, habituation, or the sustained application of settlement logic—the dynamic interval between the symbolic and the real (Δ) collapses. Without Δ , there is no rim for the drive to circle; the drive has nothing to orbit, and the cycle collapses into the repetition compulsion of the death drive (*Todestrieb*)—the tendency of systems without generative dynamics to return to their ground state, to sameness, to stasis.

Artistic processing reignites the withering cycle by reconstructing Δ . When the couple processes a shared co-evolutionary event into a new symbolic form, they create the meta-relation $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$: a structural interval between two different symbolic approaches to the same real event. This interval is Δ —the gap between the symbolic and the real that the symbolic approaches to the same event never fully close. With Δ re-established, the drive has a rim to circle; the movement of the drive around the rim is the movement of co-evolutionary engagement; and co-evolutionary engagement generates GRW.

Open question. **The nature of Δ and the phase-space reconstruction conjecture.** The account of Δ offered here—as the structural interval between two symbolic approaches to the same real event—is a philosophical account. A more precise formal account would require specifying the geometry of this interval: how large is it, how is it maintained, what conditions cause it to shrink? We conjecture, as a speculative formal proposal, that Δ is related to the dimensionality of the relational phase space reconstruction: when the relational system’s trajectory through the symbolic field is high-dimensional (many different symbolic approaches to the same real events, many different registers of symbolic engagement), Δ is large; when the trajectory is low-dimensional (the same symbolic approaches repeated without variation, the symbolic field depleted of diversity), Δ shrinks. Artistic processing increases the dimensionality of the symbolic trajectory by introducing new approaches to the same events, thereby expanding Δ and reigniting the drive. This conjecture connects to the Takens delay-embedding framework from dynamical systems theory, but the connection is at present structural rather than formally derived. We flag it as an open question for future investigation.

6.6.7 The Embodied Dimension: Why Artistic Processing Is Especially Effective

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied expression—the idea that artistic creation is not the translation of inner meaning into outer form but the emergence of meaning in the expressive act itself, through the engagement of the body with the material world (Merleau-Ponty 1962)—adds a dimension to the account of artistic processing that the purely semiotic analysis misses.

When one partner processes a shared co-evolutionary event into a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, the processing is not merely a cognitive operation on symbolic material. It is an embodied engagement with the material world—with the resistance of the words, the texture of the paint, the physical production of sound—and this embodied engagement is a form of re-contact with the real. The body does not merely record the symbolic structure of the original experience; it re-enacts the quality of the experience's engagement with the world, through a new material medium.

This embodied dimension explains why artistic processing produces higher-fidelity topological projections than purely cognitive re-engagement: the body's engagement with material in the act of artistic creation preserves aspects of the original experience's topological structure that purely cognitive operations miss. The poem about the flower preserves not only the propositional content of the experience (“we saw a flower and felt happy”) but its affective quality, its temporal dynamics, its bodily resonance—the aspects of the experience that are most directly connected to the real and most resistant to purely symbolic capture.

The embodied dimension also explains why artistic processing is particularly effective at reigniting withering cycles. A withering cycle is not merely a cycle in which the symbolic record of shared experience has become thin; it is a cycle in which the embodied quality of co-present engagement has been depleted. The couple who has lost the capacity for the wordless co-presence of relational flow—who can no longer sit together in silence without discomfort—has lost not a symbolic resource but an embodied one. Artistic processing, by re-engaging the body with the material traces of past co-evolutionary events, re-activates

the embodied capacities that the withering cycle has depleted, opening the possibility of a new quality of co-present engagement.

6.6.8 The Ethical Dimension: What Counts as Genuine Processing

Not all artistic processing is equally effective at GRW re-traversal, and some forms of processing actively destroy GRW rather than augmenting it. The distinction between genuine and spurious processing is important for the practical application of the happiness jar and for the ethical analysis of §6.12.

Genuine processing produces a topological projection that preserves the structure of the original co-evolutionary event while transforming its material form: a poem that captures the quality of the shared attention, a painting that evokes the affective register of the shared moment, a piece of music that follows the emotional trajectory of the experience. Genuine processing is characterised by fidelity to the relational dynamics of the original event, even as it transforms the event's material content.

Spurious processing produces a symbolic object that uses the materials of the shared experience for purposes other than genuine re-traversal: a poem that idealises the experience in ways that distort its actual dynamics (imaginary register processing), a narrative that frames the experience in ways that serve one party's interpretation at the expense of the other's (symbolic register appropriation), or an artistic object that performs the processing without engaging the real (a technically accomplished work that leaves the experience untouched). Spurious processing can produce beautiful symbolic objects while actively diminishing GRW, because it introduces strong suture points that close off the interpretive possibilities that genuine poetic suture preserves.

The distinction between genuine and spurious processing is directly related to the epistemic justice concerns of §6.12: the party whose interpretation of a shared co-evolutionary event dominates the processing is, in effect, imposing their symbolic frame on a reality that belongs to both. Genuine processing is dialogic in Bakhtin's sense—it is responsive to the multiple voices that participated in the original event, rather than reducing them to a single interpretive frame.

6.7. The Relational Isomorphism Principle: How the Symbolic Feeds Back into the Real

The preceding section established that the happiness jar works through the construction of a meta-relation $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ —a relation between two different symbolic approaches to the same real co-evolutionary event—and that this meta-relation reconstructs the interval Δ between the symbolic and the real, reigniting the drive that sustains co-evolutionary generativity. But this account leaves a deeper question unanswered: *why* does a structural interval in the symbolic register have any effect on the real register? Why does the construction of $\mathcal{R}(x, x')$ in the symbolic field produce changes in the relational attractor landscape that constitutes GRW in the real field?

This section proposes what we call the **Relational Isomorphism Principle** as a partial answer to this question, while honestly acknowledging the limits of what can currently be established. The principle is more a conjecture than a theorem—a hypothesis that organises the available evidence and points toward directions for further inquiry—but its philosophical implications are significant enough to warrant careful development.

6.7.1 The Problem of Cross-Register Causation

The Lacanian framework, as standardly presented, holds that the three registers—the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real—are genuinely distinct and that the real is constitutively inaccessible to symbolic operations. The real is what resists symbolisation; it is the remainder that falls outside every symbolic account; it is what the symbolic is always already failing to capture. On this reading, the question of how symbolic operations can affect the real is simply unanswerable: they cannot, by definition. The real is the condition of the symbolic, not its product.

The GRB framework proposes a modification of this picture that we believe is philosophically motivated by the relational ontology developed across the series. The modification is this: **if the real is relational in its basic structure**, then the real is not simply the pre-symbolic residue that the symbolic fails to capture. It is a relational field with its own structure—a structure that is, like all relational structures, characterised by coupling, co-evolution, and the generation of emergent properties. And if the real has this

relational structure, then it is not entirely inaccessible to symbolic operations: symbolic operations that share the same *relational structural form* as the real can make contact with the real, not through representation but through **structural resonance**.

6.7.2 The Principle Stated

The Relational Isomorphism Principle can be stated as follows:

The Relational Isomorphism Principle. If the real is relational in its basic ontological structure, then symbolic structures that share the same relational form as the real—that instantiate, in the symbolic register, the same topological relations that obtain in the real register—can produce structural effects in the real through resonance rather than representation. The mechanism is not causal in the ordinary sense (the symbolic does not act on the real as one billiard ball acts on another) but structural: two systems that share the same relational form will respond to perturbations in structurally similar ways, and a perturbation applied to one will produce a structurally similar perturbation in the other. This cross-register resonance is the mechanism by which the happiness jar’s symbolic operations produce changes in the relational attractor landscape that constitutes GRW.

The principle is explicitly conditional: it holds *if* the real is relational. This condition is the GRB framework’s fundamental ontological commitment—a commitment that, as **Paper XIV** acknowledged (Wanhong 2026), is a metaphysical choice rather than a demonstrable fact, supported by its theoretical productivity and its consonance with the best available physical theory (relational quantum mechanics (Rovelli 1996)) rather than by any direct proof.

6.7.3 Three Supporting Frameworks

Three theoretical frameworks provide partial support for the Relational Isomorphism Principle from different angles. None of them establishes the principle; together, they suggest that it is at least physically and philosophically coherent.

Relational Quantum Mechanics

Carlo Rovelli's relational interpretation of quantum mechanics holds that physical quantities—the properties of particles, the outcomes of measurements—are not absolute but relational: they exist only relative to other systems, and different systems may assign different values to the same quantity without contradiction (Rovelli 1996). On this interpretation, the real is not a collection of objects with intrinsic properties but a network of relations between systems, each of which is real only relative to other systems.

If the real has this relational structure, then the distinction between the real and the symbolic is not a distinction between an intrinsic reality and an imposed representation but a distinction between two levels of relational structure: the relational structure of the physical world and the relational structure of the symbolic order. Two systems at different levels of relational structure can, in principle, enter into structural resonance if they share the same relational form—if the pattern of relations at one level is isomorphic to the pattern of relations at another level.

This is not a claim that the symbolic order is literally quantum-mechanical. It is the structural claim that the relational form that quantum mechanics reveals at the physical level—the primacy of relations over intrinsic properties, the emergence of properties through relational interaction—is the same relational form that the GRB framework identifies at the level of intimate relational life. And if both levels share the same relational form, then structural resonance between them is at least conceivable.

Wittgenstein's Picture Theory as a Relational Isomorphism

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proposes that propositions picture facts by sharing their logical form: a proposition does not resemble what it describes but stands in the same structural relation to its components as the fact stands to the

objects that compose it (Gadamer 2004). The picture theory is a theory of structural isomorphism between the symbolic and the real: what makes a proposition meaningful is not resemblance but shared relational structure.

The picture theory is notoriously limited as a general theory of language, and Wittgenstein himself abandoned it in his later work. But its structural insight—that symbolic structures can make contact with reality through shared relational form rather than resemblance—is directly relevant to the Relational Isomorphism Principle. The happiness jar’s artistic products do not resemble the co-evolutionary events they process; they share their relational structure. And if shared relational structure is sufficient for genuine contact between the symbolic and the real, then the principle is at least logically coherent.

The GRB version of the picture theory is more modest than Wittgenstein’s: it does not claim that every symbolic structure that shares relational form with the real will produce structural effects in the real. It claims only that *some* symbolic structures—those that are genuinely relational rather than merely formally so, those that instantiate living relational dynamics rather than dead structural schemata—can produce such effects through resonance. The distinction between genuine and spurious artistic processing, introduced in §6.6.8, is the practical expression of this more modest claim.

Parametric Resonance as Formal Analogy

The third supporting framework comes from theoretical physics: the phenomenon of parametric resonance, in which two systems with different natural frequencies can exchange energy efficiently when they share a common parameter that oscillates at the appropriate frequency (Kuramoto 1984). In parametric resonance, the coupling between the two systems is not direct (one does not push the other) but mediated by the shared parameter: the oscillation of the parameter creates a structural coupling that allows energy to flow between the two systems without direct contact.

The Relational Isomorphism Principle proposes something analogous for the coupling between the symbolic and the real: the shared relational form is the parameter that mediates the coupling. When the symbolic structure and the real structure share the same relational form, perturbations in the symbolic structure produce structurally similar perturbations in the real structure, mediated by the shared relational parameter. This

is not causal in the ordinary sense but structural: the two systems are coupled through their shared form, and this coupling allows the symbolic operation to produce real effects through resonance rather than direct causation.

This physical analogy is explicitly a **structural isomorphism** rather than a literal physical claim. We are not asserting that the symbolic-real coupling is literally parametric resonance in the physical sense. We are asserting that the formal structure of parametric resonance—two systems coupled through a shared parameter, with energy transfer through resonance rather than direct contact—provides the most precise available formal analogy for the mechanism we are proposing.

6.7.4 The Condition of Relational Reality

The Relational Isomorphism Principle is conditional on the real being relational. This condition deserves careful attention, because it is the most metaphysically loaded claim in the paper.

Why should we believe that the real is relational? The GRB framework's answer, as noted above, is not that this can be proved but that it is the most theoretically productive metaphysical hypothesis available—that it generates a coherent and explanatorily rich account of intimate relational life that the alternative hypothesis (the real is non-relational, intrinsic, pre-symbolic) does not.

But the condition has a further implication that strengthens its plausibility: **if the real were non-relational, Δ would be fixed and unmodifiable**. On the standard Lacanian account, Δ —the gap between the symbolic and the real—is a structural feature of the symbolic order, not a dynamical variable. The real is always already beyond the symbolic; the gap is always the same size; and no symbolic operation can alter it. But if this were true, it would follow that no symbolic operation—no artistic processing, no happiness jar, no intentional re-traversal—could affect the relational field's GRW. The symbolic and the real would be hermetically sealed from each other, and the entire project of the happiness jar would be an illusion.

The GRB framework proposes, on the contrary, that Δ is dynamical: it can expand or contract, and its size is affected by the quality of symbolic engagement with the real. If the

real is relational, then symbolic operations that share the real’s relational form can alter the structural coupling between the symbolic and the real, thereby modifying Δ . This dynamical account of Δ is both philosophically motivated (by the relational ontology) and practically consequential (it explains why the happiness jar works and what makes artistic processing effective).

Open question. **The dynamics of Δ .** What are the precise conditions under which Δ expands or contracts? We have proposed that Δ expands when symbolic structures share the relational form of the real (genuine artistic processing) and contracts when symbolic structures impose a non-relational form on the real (strong suture, settlement, commodification). But the precise dynamical laws governing Δ ’s evolution—its time constants, its sensitivity to different symbolic operations, its relationship to the coupling strength of the relational system—are currently unknown. This is among the most important open questions for future development of the GRW framework, requiring resources from quantum information theory, dynamical systems theory, and philosophy of physics that lie beyond the scope of the present paper.

6.7.5 The Von Neumann Problem: Program and Data in the Same Space

A fundamental difficulty with the account of the happiness jar and the Relational Isomorphism Principle deserves honest acknowledgement. It was identified in our preliminary discussions as the **von Neumann problem** for the relational system.

In a von Neumann computer architecture, programs and data are stored in the same memory space, making it impossible to cleanly separate the operating code (the operator O) from the data being operated upon (the record x). Self-modifying programs—programs that modify their own instructions during execution—are possible in this architecture but are notoriously difficult to analyse, because the program’s behaviour at any moment depends on its own history of self-modification.

The relational system faces an analogous difficulty: the operator O that processes the record x is itself a product of the relational history that x records. The couple who processes their shared experience of the flower is using interpretive capacities—emotional, aesthetic, linguistic—that have themselves been shaped by the history of their shared life, including the experience of the flower that they are now processing. O and x are not cleanly separable: the operator is part of the data it operates on.

This means that the account of $O(x) = x'$ is not as clean as the formal notation suggests. O is not a fixed function applied to a fixed input; it is a dynamical system that is itself modified by the act of applying it. The O that applies to x is already different from the O that would have applied before the accumulation of GRW that the processing of x contributed to.

We do not have a formal solution to the von Neumann problem for the relational system. We acknowledge it as a genuine difficulty and note that it may point toward the need for a computational paradigm different from the von Neumann architecture—perhaps the λ -calculus (where functions and data are identical in type), perhaps a category-theoretic framework (where morphisms and objects are treated at the same level), perhaps something entirely new. This remains an open problem.

6.7.6 Implications for GRW Theory

Despite its conjectural status, the Relational Isomorphism Principle has several implications for GRW theory that are worth drawing out.

The primacy of relational form over content: What makes a symbolic operation effective at GRW re-traversal is not its content (what it says about the shared experience) but its relational form (how it structures the relations between the elements of the experience). A technically accomplished but formally non-relational artistic product—one that imposes a fixed interpretive frame on the shared experience rather than preserving and developing its relational dynamics—will be less effective at GRW augmentation than a formally relational but technically modest one.

The dialogic requirement: Genuine artistic processing must be dialogic—responsive to the multiple registers and multiple perspectives that composed the original co-evolutionary

event—rather than monologic. A monologic artistic product (one that imposes a single interpretive frame, one party’s view of what the shared experience meant) closes Δ rather than expanding it, because it introduces a strong suture point where a poetic suture is needed. Genuine GRW re-traversal requires what Bakhtin called the multi-voiced text—a symbolic structure that holds multiple interpretive possibilities open simultaneously.

The temporal non-linearity of GRW: The Relational Isomorphism Principle suggests that the temporal relationship between a co-evolutionary event and its artistic processing is not linear. A co-evolutionary event that occurred many years ago may be more richly processed now, when the relational field has accumulated the GRW necessary to engage with it at a new depth, than it could have been processed at the time of the event. The “age” of GRW is therefore not a straightforward function of calendar time but of the relational field’s current capacity for re-traversal—a capacity that is itself a product of accumulated GRW. This temporal non-linearity is the formal content of the phenomenological observation that some of the richest shared experiences only reveal their full depth years after they occurred.

6.8. The Psychoanalytic Perspective: Phallic Wealth, Drive, and the Real of GRW

The psychoanalytic tradition—and specifically the Lacanian strand of that tradition—provides a distinctive angle on the wealth question in intimate relations that neither political economy nor philosophy of science fully captures. Where political economy asks who produces and who owns, and where the Relational Isomorphism Principle asks how the symbolic can affect the real, psychoanalysis asks: what is the subjective structure of the relation to wealth? How does the form of wealth one pursues shape the structure of one’s desire, one’s drive, and one’s relation to the other?

This section develops the psychoanalytic account in three movements. First, it analyses traditional material wealth as a form of phallic signifier—as a symbolic object that organises desire around the logic of having and lacking. Second, it locates GRW within the Lacanian register system, arguing that GRW occupies a position that the standard Lacanian framework does not fully articulate: not the *objet petit a* of desire’s lack-structure,

but the real register's generative surplus. Third, it examines the drive dynamics of GRW generation, showing how the non-possessable character of GRW produces a specific drive structure—the drive of circular generativity—that is distinct from both the desire structure of lack and the death drive of stasis.

6.8.1 Traditional Wealth as Phallic Signifier

In the Lacanian framework, the phallus (*le phallus*) is not the biological organ but the **master signifier**—the signifier that organises the symbolic order around the logic of having and lacking (Lacan 2006). To have the phallus is to occupy the position of power, authority, and completeness in the symbolic order; to lack the phallus is to be in the position of need, lack, and incompleteness. The phallus is not possessed by anyone—it is a signifier, not an object—but the symbolic order is organised as though it could be possessed, and the pursuit of phallic objects (objects that promise to fill the lack, to provide the missing completeness) is the fundamental form of desire in the symbolic order.

Traditional material wealth functions as a phallic signifier in intimate relations with striking precision. Gold, money, and material assets are the paradigmatic phallic objects in the economic domain: discrete, countable, transferable, and organised by the logic of having and lacking. The party who has more gold is in the position of symbolic power; the party who has less is in the position of lack. The transaction of bride-price is therefore not merely an economic transaction but a symbolic one: it enacts the distribution of phallic power between the parties and their families, establishing who has and who lacks in the founding symbolic structure of the relation.

The phallic character of traditional material wealth explains several features of intimate relations that a purely economic analysis misses. First, it explains why the amount of bride-price matters independently of its material value: a larger bride-price is not merely more materially valuable but more symbolically powerful, because it more fully enacts the logic of phallic having. Second, it explains why the failure to pay the agreed bride-price is experienced as an insult rather than merely a financial shortfall: it is a failure of symbolic recognition, a refusal to acknowledge the other party's claim to phallic completeness. Third, it explains why material wealth in intimate relations so often becomes a site of

power struggle rather than a simple practical arrangement: because it is the medium through which the phallic distribution of power is enacted and contested.

The GRW framework, by identifying a form of wealth that is constitutively non-phallic—non-possessable, non-transferable, non-organised by the logic of having and lacking—implicitly proposes a transformation of the symbolic economy of intimate relations: a transformation from a phallic economy (organised around the logic of having and lacking) to a generative economy (organised around the logic of co-evolutionary production and non-possessive participation).

Traditional wealth as phallic signifier. Traditional material wealth in intimate relations functions as a phallic signifier: it organises the intimate relational field around the logic of having and lacking, distributes symbolic power between the parties through the medium of material exchange, and structures desire as the pursuit of phallic completeness. GRW is constitutively non-phallic: it cannot be had or lacked by either party, it is not organised by the logic of symbolic power, and it does not promise completeness but generates a different kind of satisfaction—the satisfaction of the circular drive of co-evolutionary generativity.

6.8.2 GRW in the Lacanian Register System: Beyond the *Objet Petit A*

Where does GRW fit in the Lacanian register system? The question is important because the answer determines how GRW relates to desire, drive, and the structure of the subject's relation to the other.

The most obvious candidate is the *objet petit a*: the object-cause of desire, the object that desire pursues without ever attaining, the remainder left over after symbolisation that keeps desire in motion. The *objet petit a* is a real object in Lacan's sense—it belongs to the real register, exceeds symbolisation, and cannot be fully captured by any symbolic representation. And GRW, as we have argued, is also a real phenomenon: it is

stored in the geometry of the relational attractor landscape, irreducible to any symbolic representation.

But GRW differs from the *objet petit a* in a crucial way that the standard Lacanian framework does not fully accommodate. The *objet petit a* is the **object of lack**: it is what desire pursues because it is missing, what keeps desire in motion by being constitutively unattainable. Desire, for Lacan, is always the desire for something that cannot be had; the *objet petit a* is the formal correlate of this impossibility—the object that desire constitutes as its cause precisely by being absent.

GRW is not the object of lack. It is not pursued because it is missing; it is generated by co-evolutionary activity. It is not the cause of desire in the sense of being constitutively unattainable; it is the product of a specific form of activity that is in principle available to any intimate couple willing to cultivate the conditions for it. And it does not keep desire in motion by its absence; it sustains the drive by its presence—or more precisely, by the presence of the structural interval Δ that its generation maintains.

We propose that GRW occupies a position in the Lacanian register system that the standard framework does not fully articulate: what we might call the **real register's generative surplus**—the real as productive rather than merely residual, as the source of generative activity rather than merely the remainder of failed symbolisation. This is the position that the Daoist concept of *xuande* names from a different cultural tradition: the generativity that is not the accumulation of what is present but the inexhaustible production of what emerges from the *between*.

Open question. **GRW and the limits of the Lacanian framework.** The standard Lacanian framework does not have a category for the real register's generative surplus as we have described it. The real, for Lacan, is primarily characterised negatively: as what resists symbolisation, as the remainder of failed symbolisation, as the condition of the symbolic. To characterise the real as also generative—as the source of GRW's production—requires a modification of the Lacanian framework that goes beyond what Lacan himself articulated. Whether this modification is a genuine extension of Lacanian theory or a

departure from it, and what its implications are for the theory of the subject and the theory of desire, are questions that lie beyond the scope of this paper. We flag them as important open questions for psychoanalytic theory at the intersection of clinical practice and political economy.

6.8.3 The Drive Structure of GRW Generation

If GRW is not the object of desire (which pursues what is absent) nor the object of the death drive (which tends toward stasis and the elimination of tension), what is the drive structure that GRW generation involves?

The answer draws on Lacan's account of the drive (*Trieb*) as distinct from both desire and the death drive (Lacan 2006). The drive is not directed toward any object; it finds its satisfaction in the circuit itself, in the movement around the *rim*—the edge, the opening, the structural interval that the drive circles without ever crossing. The drive is satisfied not by attaining its object but by the movement of circling around what it cannot attain.

GRW generation involves what we call the **circular drive of co-evolutionary generativity**: a drive that finds its satisfaction not in the attainment of any object (the phallic logic of having) nor in the stasis of need satisfied (the death drive's tendency toward equilibrium) but in the circular movement of co-evolutionary engagement itself. The drive circles around the relational field's Δ —the structural interval between the symbolic and the real that co-evolutionary activity maintains and expands—and finds its satisfaction in the quality of this circling rather than in any outcome it produces.

This drive structure explains several features of intimate relational life that are otherwise puzzling. It explains why the deepest relational happiness is not the happiness of having achieved something together but the happiness of being engaged together in an activity that has no determinate goal—the wordless co-presence of relational flow, the shared noticing of a contingent flower, the unhurried conversation that goes nowhere in particular and arrives somewhere neither party anticipated. These are instances of the circular drive at its purest: the drive circling around the relational field's Δ , finding its satisfaction in

the quality of the circling itself.

It also explains why the attempt to satisfy intimate desire by attaining phallic objects—more gold, more status, more material security—tends to leave the desiring party paradoxically more dissatisfied rather than less. Phallic objects satisfy desire temporarily by providing the illusion of phallic completeness, but desire is constitutively unsatisfiable by its objects (because the *objet petit a* is constitutively unattainable), and the temporary satisfaction of attaining a phallic object is quickly followed by the re-emergence of desire's lack-structure. The circular drive of GRW generation, by contrast, is not unsatisfiable in this way: it is satisfied by the movement itself, which means that the cultivation of the conditions for co-evolutionary generativity is, in principle, a sustainable form of satisfaction—not the perpetual postponement of satisfaction that phallic desire involves, but the ongoing renewal of satisfaction through the continuing circuit of the drive.

6.8.4 The Three-Register Structure of Wealth in Intimate Relations

The psychoanalytic perspective allows us to map the three registers of the GRB framework onto the three forms of wealth that operate in intimate relations, producing a more precise account of how these forms interact.

Imaginary register wealth is the wealth of the idealised image: the partner idealised as the perfect complement, the relation idealised as the source of complete satisfaction, the shared life idealised as the realisation of the imaginary ideal. Imaginary register wealth is real and important—the idealisation of the early relation is the engine of the dramatic GRW generation that characterises early intimate life—but it is structurally unstable: the idealised image is always threatened by the reality of the other's irreducible particularity, and the collapse of the imaginary ideal is experienced as a form of poverty, as the loss of what one thought one had.

Symbolic register wealth is the wealth of recognition and acknowledgment: the material and social forms through which relational value is given symbolic expression—the gift, the vow, the legal status of marriage, the social recognition of the couple as a social unit. Symbolic register wealth is also real and important—the social recognition of intimate relations provides material and legal protections that are genuine conditions for GRW generation—but it is vulnerable to the phallic logic of the symbolic order: the gift can

become a mechanism of indebtedness, the vow can become a mechanism of settlement, the legal status can become a mechanism of commodification.

Real register wealth is GRW: the accumulated structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape, stored in the geometry of the relational field, inexhaustible under use, non-possessable by either party. Real register wealth is the deepest and most stable form of wealth in intimate relations, but it is also the most invisible: it cannot be counted, settled, or transferred, and its presence is known only through the quality of co-evolutionary engagement that it supports.

The three forms of wealth are not independent but interact in complex ways. Imaginary register wealth can support the conditions for real register wealth generation during the early stages of a relation, when idealisation provides the motivational energy for the co-evolutionary engagement that generates GRW. Symbolic register wealth, when organised as a condition for GRW generation rather than as a settlement of its products, provides the material and social infrastructure within which real register wealth can be generated and sustained. And real register wealth, once accumulated, supports the resilience of both imaginary and symbolic wealth: the couple whose relational field is rich in GRW can sustain the disillusionment of the imaginary ideal and the limitations of symbolic recognition without catastrophic loss, because the real register wealth provides a deeper foundation than either the imaginary or the symbolic can offer.

6.8.5 Pathologies of Wealth in Intimate Relations: A Psychoanalytic Typology

The psychoanalytic perspective allows us to identify several pathological structures of wealth in intimate relations—structures in which the three forms of wealth are misaligned in ways that destroy the conditions for GRW generation.

Phallic substitution: The substitution of symbolic register wealth for real register wealth—the attempt to compensate for the absence of GRW by accumulating material wealth, social status, or symbolic recognition. This pathology is common in relations where the co-evolutionary dynamics have been depleted by the sustained application of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness: the parties accumulate more material wealth, more impressive social performances, more elaborate rituals of symbolic recognition, while the relational attractor landscape continues to degrade. The increasing wealth

in the imaginary and symbolic registers masks the decreasing wealth in the real register, making the pathology harder to diagnose.

Imaginary fixation: The attempt to sustain the idealised image of the early relation against the reality of the other's irreducible particularity—the refusal to allow the imaginary ideal to be superseded by the real register wealth that the other's genuine particularity can generate. This pathology is characterised by jealousy, possessiveness, and the demand that the other conform to the idealised image rather than being allowed to develop through co-evolutionary engagement. It destroys GRW by preventing the genuine co-evolutionary dynamics that real register wealth generation requires.

Real register avoidance: The avoidance of the intimacy that real register engagement requires—the preference for the relative safety of imaginary idealisation and symbolic recognition over the vulnerability of genuine co-present co-evolutionary engagement. This pathology is the most common and the most subtle: it can coexist with high levels of imaginary and symbolic register wealth (the relation may appear, from the outside, to be flourishing) while the real register is systematically avoided, and GRW is not generated. The couple who fills their shared time with activities, events, and social performances—who are never simply present with each other in the quiet that real register engagement requires—may be practising real register avoidance without being aware of it.

The typology suggests that the diagnosis of relational wealth depletion is not straightforward. The symptoms of GRW depletion—the withering cycle, the loss of co-evolutionary generativity, the sense that the relational field is thin and depleted—can be masked by the accumulation of imaginary and symbolic register wealth. The happiness jar is valuable precisely because it provides a practice that works at the real register level, bypassing the imaginary and symbolic masks and making direct contact with the structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape that constitute GRW.

6.9. The Feminist Perspective: Relational Subjectivity, Care Ethics, and the Non-Phallic Wealth

The feminist tradition offers perspectives on wealth in intimate relations that neither political economy nor psychoanalysis fully captures. Where political economy asks who

produces and who owns, and where psychoanalysis asks what subjective structure the relation to wealth involves, feminist theory asks: whose labour has been systematically made invisible, whose subjectivity has been structurally denied, and what alternative forms of subjectivity and wealth might be possible if the dominant framework is challenged?

This section develops the feminist perspective in five movements. It begins with the structural problem of subjectivity in intimate relational life, showing how the dominant framework has denied genuine subjectivity to those who perform the labour of generating relational value. It then examines three feminist attempts to solve this problem—the first-wave liberal strategy, the second-wave critique of the liberal solution, and the care ethics alternative—showing how each contributes to and falls short of the GRW framework’s account of relational subjectivity. Finally, it develops the feminist implications of GRW theory itself, arguing that GRW is constitutively a non-phallic wealth form that both requires and enables a genuinely relational subjectivity—and that this has implications not only for intimate relations but for the broader political economy of social reproduction.

6.9.1 The Structural Problem: Whose Subjectivity?

The dominant frameworks for understanding intimate relations—from the legal and economic frameworks that organise their material dimensions to the philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks that theorise their subjective dimensions—share a structural feature that feminist theory has consistently identified and challenged: they take the **individual subject** as their fundamental unit, and they implicitly model this individual subject on the figure of the autonomous, self-determining, economically independent agent—a figure that has historically been identified with the masculine position in the social division of labour.

This structural feature has a specific consequence for the understanding of wealth in intimate relations: the wealth generated by those who perform the relational labour of care, emotional support, and attentive co-presence—labour historically performed predominantly by women—is systematically invisible in frameworks organised around the individual subject’s accumulation, exchange, and enjoyment of wealth. Federici’s analysis of social reproduction (Federici 2004) named this invisibility and located it in the structural requirements of capitalist production: capitalism requires the reproduction of labour

power, which requires reproductive and care labour, which must therefore be performed without being recognised as wealth production, because its recognition would require its compensation and thereby undermine the extraction of surplus value from the workers whose reproduction it supports.

But the feminist critique goes deeper than the political economic level. The invisibility of care labour as wealth production is not merely an economic injustice; it is an **ontological injustice**—a misrecognition of what the care labourer is and what they do. The woman whose emotional labour, attentive co-presence, and relational maintenance generates the GRW of the shared life is not merely economically exploited; she is ontologically misrecognised: her activity is not seen as productive, her contributions are not counted as wealth, and her subjectivity—constituted through and in the activity of relational care—is not recognised as a genuine form of human subjectivity.

6.9.2 The First-Wave Liberal Strategy and Its Limits

The first-wave feminist response to this structural problem was to demand for women the same individual subjectivity that men had been granted: the right to own property, to enter contracts, to vote, to participate in public life as autonomous, self-determining agents. This strategy was politically crucial and historically transformative: it secured for women legal and economic protections that are genuine conditions for a minimally adequate intimate relational life.

But the first-wave strategy has a structural limitation that the GRW framework makes visible: it sought to secure for women the same **individual** subjectivity that men possessed, thereby accepting the dominant framework's individualist model of subjectivity as the standard to be met. Women were to be recognised as individual subjects in the same sense that men were individual subjects—autonomous, self-determining, economically independent—rather than challenging the model of subjectivity itself.

This acceptance of the individualist model has a specific consequence for the understanding of wealth in intimate relations: it leaves intact the framework in which care labour and relational maintenance are not recognised as wealth production. If the standard of subjectivity is individual autonomy and self-determination, then the activity of relational care—which is constitutively not autonomous (it is responsive to the other) and

not self-determining (it is shaped by the needs and dynamics of the relational field)—will continue to appear as a lesser form of activity, a deviation from the standard rather than a genuine alternative to it.

6.9.3 The Second-Wave Critique and the Problem of the Alternative

The second-wave feminist tradition recognised the limitation of the first-wave strategy and developed a more radical critique of the dominant model of subjectivity. For Simone de Beauvoir, the fundamental problem was not the exclusion of women from a form of subjectivity they were otherwise capable of exercising, but the construction of women as **Other** within a framework in which the subject—the position of genuine agency, freedom, and self-determination—was constitutively masculine (Held 2006). Liberation, on this account, required not just inclusion in the existing subject position but the transformation of subjectivity itself: the recognition of women as genuine subjects, which required challenging the model of subjectivity that had been constructed in opposition to the feminine.

But the second-wave critique faced a problem of the alternative: if the dominant model of subjectivity is to be challenged, what is to replace it? The second-wave tradition largely answered this question by proposing a revised model of individual subjectivity—one that was more embodied, more emotionally engaged, more relational than the Cartesian model—but that retained the individual as its fundamental unit. Even in its most relational forms, second-wave feminism tended to understand the self as an individual self that is constituted through relations, rather than as a relational field that generates selves through co-evolutionary dynamics.

The GRB framework proposes a more radical answer to the problem of the alternative: not a revised model of individual subjectivity but a **relational ontology** in which the relational field is the primary unit and individual subjectivity is a product of relational dynamics. This is not merely a philosophical position but a political one: it implies that the recognition of care labour as wealth production requires not only the redistribution of economic resources but the transformation of the ontological framework within which wealth and production are understood.

6.9.4 Care Ethics and the Relational Alternative

Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking study of women's moral reasoning (Gilligan 1982) identified an alternative to the dominant model of moral subjectivity that is directly relevant to the GRW framework. Where the dominant model (Kohlberg's stages of moral development) understood moral maturity as the capacity for abstract, universal, rule-governed reasoning—the capacity to apply general principles to particular cases without being distorted by particular attachments—Gilligan found that many of her female respondents reasoned in a fundamentally different way: not from general principles to particular cases, but from the particular relationships and particular responsibilities that constituted their lives to the responses that those relationships called for.

Gilligan called this the **ethics of care**: a form of moral reasoning that begins not with universal principles but with particular relationships, that understands moral agency not as autonomy from attachment but as responsiveness to the demands of specific relationships, and that values not the impartiality of the universal moral law but the attentiveness and responsiveness that particular relationships require.

The ethics of care is not merely a different style of moral reasoning; it implies a different model of subjectivity. The care-ethical subject is not the autonomous individual of liberal theory, constituted independently of their relationships and choosing to enter them; it is a **relational subject**, constituted through and in their particular relationships, whose agency is the agency of responsive attentiveness rather than autonomous self-determination.

Nel Noddings's development of care ethics (Noddings 1984) makes the relational subjectivity of the care-ethical framework even more explicit. For Noddings, caring is not a one-way relation of the carer toward the cared-for but a **two-way relational dynamic**: genuine caring requires the carer to receive the cared-for's response and to allow that response to modify the caring activity. The carer who cares without receiving—who provides care without attending to the cared-for's reception of it—is not genuinely caring in Noddings's sense; they are performing care, which is a different and lesser thing. Genuine caring is a form of co-evolutionary engagement: the carer and the cared-for are coupled in a dynamic in which each modifies the other's activity, producing a caring relationship

that is irreducible to either party's individual contribution.

Virginia Held's political extension of care ethics (Held 2006) argues that care is not merely a private relational practice but a political principle: that the relations of care that sustain human life should be the model for political arrangements, rather than the market relations of self-interested exchange or the contractual relations of autonomous agents. This political extension is directly relevant to the GRW framework: it suggests that the transformation of intimate relational life along GRW lines is not merely a personal project but a political one, requiring the transformation of the social and economic structures that currently prevent care from being recognised and sustained as the primary form of human value production.

Care ethics and GRW: the convergence. The ethics of care tradition—Gilligan's identification of care-ethical reasoning, Noddings's account of caring as a two-way relational dynamic, and Held's political extension of care ethics—provides an independent philosophical grounding for the GRW framework's account of relational subjectivity and relational wealth. Care labour is GRW production; the care-ethical subject is the relational subject of GRW generation; and the political transformation that care ethics calls for—the recognition of care as the primary form of human value production—is the political dimension of the GRW framework's theoretical project.

6.9.5 Relational Subjectivity: The Third Way

The GRW framework proposes what we call **relational subjectivity** as an alternative to both the liberal individual subject (the autonomous, self-determining agent of the dominant framework) and the care-ethical subject (the responsive, attentive caregiver of Gilligan and Noddings). Relational subjectivity is not a compromise between these two positions but a genuinely different ontological proposal: the claim that the primary unit of subjectivity is not the individual but the **relational field**, and that individual subjects are products of relational dynamics rather than their preconditions.

This proposal has several implications for the understanding of gender and wealth in intimate relations.

First, relational subjectivity dissolves the opposition between the autonomous individual and the relational caregiver that has structured feminist debate since de Beauvoir. If the primary subject is the relational field, then neither the autonomous individual nor the responsive caregiver is the fundamental form of subjectivity; both are specific modes of participation in relational dynamics, and the question is not which is more genuinely human but which modes of participation are most generative of GRW.

Second, relational subjectivity reconceives the problem of care labour's invisibility. On the individualist framework, care labour is invisible because it does not produce individual wealth—it does not accumulate in the individual's account, does not build individual capital, does not enhance individual autonomy. On the relational subjectivity framework, care labour is the primary form of wealth production precisely because it is the activity that most directly generates and sustains the relational field's GRW. The invisibility of care labour is therefore not a reflection of its unproductiveness but of the dominant framework's inability to see what it produces—a form of epistemic injustice that §6.12 analyses in detail.

Third, relational subjectivity provides the ontological basis for a non-essentialist feminist politics of intimate life. The claim that care labour generates GRW does not require the claim that women are naturally more caring than men, or that care is essentially feminine. It requires only the empirical observation that care labour has historically been performed predominantly by women, and the normative claim that the distribution of care labour should be organised to maximise the relational field's GRW generation rather than to reproduce existing gender hierarchies. A genuinely relational subjectivity is gender-neutral in its structure—both parties to the relational field are constituted through it, both contribute to its dynamics, and both benefit from its GRW. The gendered distribution of care labour is a historical contingency that the GRW framework, by making care labour visible as the primary form of wealth production, provides resources to challenge.

6.9.6 The Non-Phallic Wealth and Its Political Implications

GRW is constitutively non-phallic: it cannot be had or lacked, it is not organised by the logic of symbolic power, and it does not promise the completeness that phallic objects promise. This non-phallic character has implications that extend beyond the intimate relational field into the broader political economy of social life.

The phallic economy—the economy organised around the logic of having and lacking, in which wealth is the medium of symbolic power and its accumulation is the pursuit of phallic completeness—is not gender-neutral. The phallic position has been historically identified with the masculine, and the wealth forms that most directly instantiate phallic logic—gold, money, property, productive capital—have been historically controlled predominantly by men. The feminist political economy of intimate relations is therefore inseparable from the critique of phallic wealth: challenging the organisation of intimate relations around the logic of having and lacking is inseparable from challenging the gendered distribution of symbolic power in the broader social field.

GRW's non-phallic character makes it a potentially **liberatory** form of wealth—not because it eliminates the need for material wealth (which it does not) but because it provides a form of wealth that is not organised by the phallic logic of symbolic power. A relational field rich in GRW is not a field in which one party has more symbolic power than the other; it is a field in which both parties participate in the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate a wealth that belongs to neither of them individually. This is the economic correlate of what the care ethics tradition calls genuine caring: not the unilateral provision of care by one party for another, but the co-evolutionary dynamic in which both parties are simultaneously carers and cared-for, both generators of GRW and beneficiaries of it.

The political implication is significant: if GRW is the primary form of wealth in intimate relations, and if GRW is non-phallic in its structure, then the organisation of intimate relations around GRW rather than around material wealth would represent a transformation of the gendered power structure of intimate life that goes beyond what either liberal feminism (which seeks equal access to phallic wealth) or radical feminism (which critiques the phallic structure itself) has fully articulated. It is the feminist political economy of the *between*: not the redistribution of phallic wealth between individual subjects, but the

cultivation of a form of wealth that belongs to the relational field and that is, by its very structure, immune to the phallic logic of having and lacking.

Sara Ruddick's account of maternal thinking (Ruddick 1989) provides a further dimension of this feminist political economy. Ruddick argues that the practice of caring for children—attending to their particular needs, responding to their particular vulnerabilities, fostering their growth without controlling its direction—develops a specific form of practical reasoning that she calls **attentive love**: a form of knowledge that is constitutively relational, responsive, and non-possessive. Attentive love is, in Ruddick's account, a politically significant epistemic practice: it is a form of knowing that the dominant framework cannot recognise as knowledge, because it does not fit the model of detached, universal, rule-governed cognition that the dominant framework treats as the standard.

In the GRW framework, attentive love is not merely an epistemic practice but a **wealth generation practice**: the practice of attending to the particular needs and dynamics of the relational field, responding to its contingent events with genuine co-present receptivity, and fostering its growth without claiming its products—the practice of *xuande* in its most fully developed form. The feminist insight that this practice has been undervalued and made invisible is the feminist political economy of GRW: the claim that the most important form of wealth production in human social life has been rendered invisible by the dominant framework's inability to see beyond the phallic logic of having and lacking.

6.10. The Epistemic Dialectic: The Unverifiability of GRW and the Epistemic Advantages of Traditional Wealth

A theory of wealth that celebrates a form of wealth that is invisible, unverifiable, and unquantifiable must confront the obvious objection: what good is wealth that cannot be recognised, measured, or institutionally protected? This section addresses that objection directly and honestly, arguing that the epistemic opacity of GRW is not an incidental limitation to be overcome but a structural feature that follows from GRW's ontological character—and that acknowledging this opacity is necessary for an adequate account of how GRW and material wealth can coexist in a way that supports rather than undermines intimate relational flourishing.

The section proceeds dialectically: it begins by acknowledging the genuine epistemic advantages of traditional material wealth (the thesis), then shows how these advantages come at a cost that the GRW framework identifies as ontological impoverishment (the antithesis), and finally proposes a synthesis in which the two forms of wealth are understood as complementary rather than competitive, occupying different epistemic and ontological registers with different but equally genuine forms of reality.

6.10.1 The Genuine Epistemic Advantages of Traditional Wealth

Traditional material wealth—gold, money, property, legally recognised assets—has three epistemic advantages over GRW that must be honestly acknowledged: verifiability, operability, and cognitive accessibility.

Verifiability: The quantity of gold in a vault can be measured by any competent observer, independently of the beliefs, feelings, or intentions of the parties involved. A bank account balance is verifiable by third parties who have no relationship with the account holder. A property title is verifiable through public records. This third-party verifiability is not a trivial advantage: it is what makes material wealth legally protectable, institutionally transmissible, and socially recognisable. Courts can adjudicate disputes about material wealth because the facts at issue—who owns what, how much, under what conditions—are, in principle, verifiable. Insurance companies can protect material wealth because the value of what is insured can be assessed. Tax authorities can levy wealth taxes because wealth can be measured.

GRW has no analogue to this third-party verifiability. The depth of the shared attractor landscape of a life built together cannot be measured by any external observer. The quality of co-evolutionary engagement cannot be assessed by anyone who was not a participant in it. The accumulated holonomy of a relational trajectory cannot be audited. This epistemic opacity is not a contingent limitation that better measurement technology might overcome; it is a structural feature of GRW that follows directly from its ontological character: GRW is stored in the geometry of the relational field, which is accessible only through co-present participation in the field's dynamics, not through external observation.

Operability: Material wealth can be given, received, invested, transferred, and dis-

tributed through well-defined operations. I can give you a gold ring; you can invest the proceeds of a property sale; we can divide the assets of a dissolved partnership according to a formula that both parties agree to in advance. These operations are standardised, repeatable, and institutionally supported: there are legal frameworks, financial instruments, and social conventions that specify how material wealth is to be transferred, protected, and distributed.

GRW has no analogue to these operations. It cannot be given—it can only be generated together. It cannot be invested—it can only be cultivated through co-evolutionary engagement. It cannot be transferred—the GRW of one relational field cannot be moved to another. And it cannot be distributed through an agreed formula—because it is not a stock of discrete units but a structural property of the relational field, it cannot be divided between the parties in the event of the relation’s dissolution. When a long intimate relation ends, both parties lose the GRW that was stored in the shared attractor landscape, and no legal framework can restore it: the legal instruments that distribute material assets in divorce proceedings have no power over the GRW that the shared life generated and that the dissolution destroys.

Cognitive accessibility: Material wealth is easy to think about. Its magnitude can be represented by a number; its distribution can be represented by a table; its change over time can be represented by a graph. The cognitive tools that human beings have developed for reasoning about quantities—arithmetic, algebra, statistics—are directly applicable to material wealth. This cognitive accessibility makes material wealth amenable to planning, budgeting, and deliberate management: one can set savings targets, investment strategies, and distribution plans with reference to quantitative measures of material wealth.

GRW is cognitively difficult. It cannot be represented by a number; its “magnitude” (if that concept applies at all) cannot be compared across relational fields; its change over time cannot be represented on a graph. The cognitive tools available for reasoning about GRW are qualitative rather than quantitative: phenomenological description, narrative, artistic expression, metaphor. These tools are not inferior to quantitative tools—they are, for GRW, more adequate—but they are less cognitively tractable, less amenable to planning and deliberate management, and less susceptible to the institutional protections

that quantitative representation makes possible.

The genuine epistemic advantages of material wealth. Material wealth has three genuine epistemic advantages over GRW: verifiability (accessible to third-party measurement), operability (susceptible to well-defined transfer and distribution operations), and cognitive accessibility (representable in quantitative terms). These advantages are not trivial: they are what makes material wealth legally protectable, institutionally transmissible, and cognitively manageable. Any account of GRW that does not honestly acknowledge these advantages is incomplete.

6.10.2 The Cost of Epistemic Transparency: Ontological Impoverishment

The epistemic advantages of material wealth come at a cost that the GRW framework identifies as **ontological impoverishment**: the reduction of wealth to what can be verified, operated upon, and cognitively accessed through quantitative tools necessarily excludes from the category of wealth everything that is not verifiable, operable, and quantifiable—including the most significant forms of value generated in intimate relational life.

This exclusion is not neutral. When the only recognised forms of wealth in intimate relations are the verifiable, operable, and quantitatively accessible ones, the invisible forms of relational value generation—care labour, emotional attentiveness, the patient cultivation of co-evolutionary dynamics—are not merely unrecognised; they are **actively devalued**. They appear, from within the dominant epistemic framework, not as forms of wealth production but as the absence of wealth production: as the failure to engage in the quantitatively measurable activities that constitute genuine productivity.

This active devaluation has material consequences. The party who invests their time and attention in the cultivation of the relational field's GRW—rather than in the accumulation of individual material wealth—is, within the dominant framework, making themselves

materially vulnerable: they are not building the individual capital that would protect them in the event of the relation's dissolution. This vulnerability is structurally produced by the dominant epistemic framework's inability to recognise GRW as genuine wealth, and it falls disproportionately on those who have historically been most responsible for the relational labour of intimate life.

The cost of epistemic transparency is therefore not merely philosophical—a limitation in what the dominant framework can see—but political and economic: it produces a systematic material disadvantage for those whose primary form of wealth production is invisible to the dominant framework. The feminist political economy of GRW, developed in the preceding section, is the analysis of this systematic disadvantage.

6.10.3 The Complementary Account: Different Epistemic Registers for Different Ontological Realities

The dialectical synthesis of the preceding two movements is not a compromise—a claim that both forms of wealth are equally good or equally limited—but a **complementary account**: the claim that material wealth and GRW occupy different epistemic registers because they are different ontological realities, and that the epistemic tools adequate to one are not adequate to the other.

Material wealth is a symbolic register phenomenon: it is constituted in and through the symbolic order, organised by the logic of the signifier, and accessible to the tools of symbolic cognition—quantitative representation, legal codification, institutional management. Its epistemic transparency is a consequence of its symbolic character: what is fully constituted in the symbolic order is, in principle, fully accessible to symbolic tools.

GRW is a real register phenomenon: it is constituted in the geometry of the relational field, organised by the logic of structural modification and holonomy accumulation, and accessible only through the qualitative tools of phenomenological description, narrative, and artistic expression. Its epistemic opacity is a consequence of its real character: what is constituted in the real register is, in principle, not fully accessible to symbolic tools, because the real is constitutively in excess of the symbolic.

This complementary account has several important implications.

First, the epistemic opacity of GRW is not a problem to be solved but a feature to be understood: it reflects the ontological difference between GRW and material wealth, and any attempt to make GRW epistemically transparent—to quantify it, to make it legally cognisable, to subject it to the institutional tools of material wealth management—would necessarily distort it, converting the real register phenomenon into a symbolic register one and thereby destroying what is most essential about it.

Second, the epistemic tools adequate to GRW—phenomenological description, narrative, artistic expression, dialogic conversation—are not inferior to the quantitative tools adequate to material wealth; they are different tools for a different reality. The couple who seek to assess the state of their relational field’s GRW through quantitative measures—“how many quality time hours did we have this week?”—are using the wrong tools: they are applying symbolic register tools to a real register phenomenon, and the result will be not an accurate assessment of their GRW but a distorted one that misses what matters most.

Third, the complementary account suggests that the institutions responsible for supporting intimate relational life—legal systems, social services, financial institutions—face a genuine limitation: they can protect and support material wealth, but they cannot protect or support GRW by the same means. This does not mean that institutions cannot do anything for GRW: they can create the material conditions that make GRW generation possible (by ensuring adequate material security, recognising and compensating care labour, regulating the digital extraction of relational value), but they cannot directly manage or distribute GRW, because the tools of institutional management are symbolic register tools and GRW is a real register phenomenon.

6.10.4 The Practical Challenge: Living with Epistemic Asymmetry

The epistemic asymmetry between material wealth and GRW creates practical challenges for intimate relational life that deserve honest acknowledgement.

The most significant practical challenge is what we call the **recognition problem**: how do the parties to an intimate relation know whether they have GRW, and how do they communicate about it? If GRW is epistemically opaque—not fully accessible to quantitative representation or third-party verification—then the parties’ knowledge of their

relational field's GRW is necessarily partial, perspectival, and difficult to share.

The recognition problem is exacerbated by the three pathologies identified in §6.8.5: phallic substitution, imaginary fixation, and real register avoidance can all produce the appearance of relational wealth while the real register is depleted. A couple who has accumulated impressive material wealth, who maintains an elaborate social performance of relational flourishing, and who avoids the vulnerability of genuine co-present engagement may experience themselves as wealthy in their intimate relation while their GRW is steadily depleted. The symptoms of GRW depletion—the withering cycle, the loss of co-evolutionary generativity—may be masked by the accumulation of symbolic register wealth until the depletion is too advanced to easily reverse.

The recognition problem does not have a technical solution—there is no instrument that can measure GRW directly. But it has a **practical response**: the cultivation of the epistemic practices that are adequate to GRW's real register character. These practices—the attentive phenomenological description of the quality of co-present engagement, the dialogic conversation about the relational field's dynamics, the artistic processing of shared experience that the happiness jar makes possible—are not measurements of GRW but genuine engagements with it: ways of making contact with the real register of the relational field that allow the parties to develop a qualitative, narrative, experiential knowledge of their GRW that, while not quantitatively precise, is epistemically adequate to what it seeks to know.

The second practical challenge is the **vulnerability problem**: the party who invests primarily in GRW rather than in individual material wealth is making themselves vulnerable in ways that the dominant epistemic framework cannot protect. When the intimate relation dissolves, GRW dissolves with it; the legal framework distributes material assets but cannot restore the relational attractor landscape that the shared life generated. The party who has invested primarily in GRW—who has devoted their time and attention to the cultivation of the relational field at the cost of building individual material capital—may find themselves materially impoverished in ways that the dominant framework does not recognise as a genuine loss.

The vulnerability problem is real and serious, and the GRW framework does not minimise

it. The practical response is threefold: first, the political response of ensuring that care labour is materially recognised and compensated, so that investment in GRW does not automatically entail material vulnerability; second, the relational response of ensuring that both parties to the intimate relation invest in GRW together, so that neither is disproportionately vulnerable; and third, the personal response of maintaining an adequate material floor—enough individual material security to prevent material dependency from distorting the relational dynamics—while not allowing the accumulation of individual material wealth to crowd out the investment in GRW that is the primary form of intimate relational flourishing.

6.11. The Dialectical Movement: Hegel, Marx, and the Historical Materialism of Relational Wealth

The preceding sections have developed GRW as a theoretical concept and have examined it from multiple angles—political economic, semiotic, psychoanalytic, feminist, and epistemic. This section situates GRW within the broader movement of historical development, asking: how did the current organisation of wealth in intimate relations come to be, what contradictions does it contain, and toward what resolution does the movement of those contradictions tend?

The analysis draws on both Hegel's dialectical logic and Marx's historical materialism, combining their insights while acknowledging the tensions between them. From Hegel, we take the concept of the dialectical movement of contradictions through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and the insistence that each moment of the dialectic is necessary—that the antithesis is not merely a mistake to be corrected but a necessary stage in the development of the concept (Hegel 1977). From Marx, we take the insistence that the movement of the dialectic is driven by material contradictions in the conditions of production and reproduction, not by the internal logic of ideas, and that the resolution of contradictions requires material transformation, not merely conceptual clarification (Marx 1976).

6.11.1 The Primary and Secondary Aspects of the Contradiction

The central contradiction of wealth in intimate relations can be stated with precision: **GRW is the primary form of wealth in intimate relations—the form that most fundamentally constitutes relational flourishing—but it cannot be generated or sustained without the material conditions that only secondary forms of wealth (material, symbolic) can provide.**

This is a contradiction in the Hegelian-Marxist sense: not a mere inconsistency or logical error, but a real tension within the object itself—a tension that drives the object's development and that cannot be resolved by simply choosing one side over the other. The contradiction is not between GRW and material wealth as competing values but between the primary form of relational wealth and the material conditions of its possibility.

In the language of Maoist dialectics (itself a development of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition), we can identify a **principal contradiction** with a principal aspect and a secondary aspect:

Principal aspect (GRW): The primary form of relational wealth, the most fundamental constituent of intimate relational flourishing, the form of wealth that cannot be reduced to any other. GRW is the principal aspect because it determines the character of the contradiction—the question of intimate relational flourishing is fundamentally the question of how GRW is generated, sustained, and protected.

Secondary aspect (material and symbolic wealth): The necessary condition for GRW generation, the material infrastructure without which GRW cannot be cultivated. Material and symbolic wealth are the secondary aspect not because they are unimportant—they are necessary—but because their value is instrumental rather than intrinsic: they matter insofar as they create the conditions for GRW generation, not in themselves.

The principal contradiction of relational wealth. The principal contradiction of wealth in intimate relations has GRW as its principal aspect and material/symbolic wealth as its secondary aspect. GRW is the primary form of intimate relational flourishing; ma-

terial and symbolic wealth are its necessary but not sufficient conditions. The resolution of the contradiction requires not the elimination of either aspect but the transformation of their relation: the organisation of material and symbolic wealth as conditions for GRW generation rather than as substitutes for it or as ends in themselves.

6.11.2 The Thesis: Pre-Modern Intimate Relations and the Undifferentiated Field

The Hegelian dialectic requires that we identify the thesis—the initial, undifferentiated moment from which the dialectical movement begins. For the history of wealth in intimate relations, the thesis is the pre-modern organisation of intimate life in which GRW and material wealth were not yet clearly differentiated: in which the shared life of an intimate couple was simultaneously a material, economic, and relational unit, in which the labour of household production and the labour of relational care were not yet separated into distinct domains with distinct value logics.

In pre-modern agrarian societies, the household (*oikos*, in Aristotle’s account) was the fundamental unit of both material production and intimate relational life (Aristotle 2000). The work of the household—producing food, making clothing, raising children, maintaining the dwelling—was simultaneously material production (generating the goods necessary for survival) and relational production (sustaining the bonds of care and co-presence that constituted the intimate relational field). The material and the relational were not yet separated; the GRW generated by the shared life of the household and the material wealth generated by the household’s productive labour were aspects of a single, undifferentiated process.

This undifferentiated unity is the thesis: a moment of initial unity that contains within itself the contradictions that will drive the dialectical development. The contradictions are already present in the thesis: the household is simultaneously a site of genuine relational co-evolution and a site of patriarchal power that systematically subordinates the relational labour of women to the material requirements of the productive household. The unity of material and relational production is not a harmonious unity but a contradictory one, in which the conditions for GRW generation are embedded in structures of domination

that systematically extract the GRW-generating labour of women for the benefit of the household's male head.

Traditional wealth forms such as bride-price are products of this contradictory unity: they simultaneously serve the genuine function of material security provision and reproduce the patriarchal power structure that extracts women's relational labour without recognition or reciprocity. The dialectical analysis does not simply condemn bride-price as an injustice; it understands it as a historically necessary form that contains within itself the contradictions that drive its own supersession.

6.11.3 The Antithesis: Capitalist Modernity and the Separation of the Material from the Relational

The capitalist transformation of the economy produces the antithesis: the radical separation of material production from relational life, and the systematic subordination of relational life to the requirements of material production. This separation is the defining feature of capitalist modernity for the analysis of intimate relational wealth.

The separation takes a specific form. With the development of capitalist market relations, material production is progressively removed from the household and concentrated in the market: the goods that pre-modern households produced for themselves are now produced in factories and purchased in markets. The household is transformed from a site of material production into a site of consumption and reproduction: its function is no longer to produce material goods but to reproduce the labour power that the market requires—to feed, clothe, and shelter workers, to bear and raise the next generation of workers, and to provide the emotional support that sustains workers through the alienation of market labour.

This transformation has two consequences that are directly relevant to the analysis of intimate relational wealth. First, it makes the relational labour of the household—the care, emotional support, and co-present engagement that constitute intimate relational life—**economically invisible**: this labour does not produce market goods and therefore does not appear in any measure of economic productivity. Federici's analysis (Federici 2004) is the definitive account of this invisibility: capitalist production depends on reproductive labour but cannot recognise it as productive without being required to compensate it.

Second, and more subtly, the separation of material production from relational life introduces a new form of the contradiction between GRW and material wealth. In pre-modern households, the contradiction between material and relational wealth was embedded in the undifferentiated unity of household life; it was a contradiction within a single process. In capitalist modernity, the contradiction is externalised: the material and the relational are now two separate domains, governed by different logics (the market logic of exchange value and the relational logic of GRW generation), and the contradiction between them is experienced as the conflict between the demands of market work and the needs of intimate relational life.

This externalised contradiction is the antithesis: a moment of radical separation that makes explicit the contradictions that were implicit in the thesis. The antithesis is not merely negative—it is a necessary stage in the dialectical development, because the separation of material and relational wealth makes visible the distinction between them that the undifferentiated unity of the thesis obscured. Only by becoming clearly separate can the two forms of wealth be understood in their proper relation—not as aspects of a single undifferentiated process, but as genuinely distinct forms of value that stand in a specific dialectical relation.

The pathologies of capitalist modernity in the domain of intimate relational wealth are the expression of the antithesis's one-sidedness: the dominance of market logic over relational logic, the subordination of GRW generation to material accumulation, the commodification of intimate life, and the systematic depletion of GRW through the extraction of relational value by digital platforms, consumerism, and the demands of market work. These pathologies are not contingent failures but necessary expressions of the antithesis's contradictions.

6.11.4 The Synthesis: Toward a New Organisation of Relational Wealth

The synthesis—the resolution of the contradiction between GRW and material wealth—cannot be a simple return to the thesis (the pre-modern undifferentiated unity) nor a continuation of the antithesis (the capitalist separation). It must be a higher unity that preserves what is genuine in both moments while superseding their contradictions: a form of social organisation in which material wealth is organised as a condition for GRW

generation, and in which GRW is recognised as the primary form of intimate relational flourishing.

The synthesis is not yet fully realised; it is a tendency within the contradictions of the present moment, not an achieved historical fact. But its outlines can be discerned from the analysis of the contradictions that drive the development.

The recognition of care labour as wealth production is the first element of the synthesis: the social and material recognition of the relational labour that generates GRW, making it visible as a genuine form of productive activity that deserves material compensation and social support. This recognition is already partially achieved in the development of welfare state provisions for childcare, eldercare, and parental leave; it remains incomplete wherever these provisions are inadequate, means-tested, or organised around the assumption that care labour is a private responsibility rather than a social one.

The transformation of material wealth organisation is the second element: the organisation of material wealth in intimate relations as a condition for GRW generation rather than as a substitute for it. This requires the threshold principle of §6.4.5: material wealth sufficient to remove material stress from the relational field, but not organised around the accumulation logic that introduces settlement, commodification, and indebtedness. Concrete forms of this transformation include the recognition of care labour in legal property regimes (ensuring that the party who has invested primarily in GRW is not left materially impoverished by the dissolution of the relation), the regulation of digital platform extraction of relational value, and the cultural challenge to consumerist forms of relational celebration that substitute commodity exchange for co-evolutionary engagement.

The cultural transformation of intimate relational norms is the third element: the development of a cultural framework in which GRW is recognised as the primary form of intimate relational wealth, and in which the practices of GRW generation—joint attention, timely sharing, co-evolutionary receptivity, non-possessive participation—are valued and cultivated rather than marginalised and made invisible by the dominance of material accumulation logic. This cultural transformation is the domain of the ethics

chapter (§6.12) and the praxis chapter (§6.14).

6.11.5 The Historical Materialist Analysis of Traditional Wealth Forms

The historical materialist framework provides the analysis of traditional wealth forms in intimate relations that the GRW framework's structural critique requires but cannot provide on its own. The structural critique shows that bride-price, dowry, and related practices operate through mechanisms (settlement, commodification, indebtedness) that destroy the conditions for GRW generation. The historical materialist analysis explains why these practices developed and why they persist—not as expressions of malice or ignorance but as historically necessary forms that served genuine functions under specific material conditions.

The historical necessity of traditional wealth forms: In pre-modern societies without developed legal systems, without social insurance, without formal financial markets, and without the state capacity to enforce contractual obligations, the material transfer of bride-price served genuine functions that had no institutional alternatives: it provided material security for the bride and her family in the absence of other protections; it created reputational incentives for the groom's family to honour their commitments in the absence of legal enforcement; and it established the social recognition of the new intimate relation in the absence of formal registration systems.

These functions were genuine, and the forms that served them cannot be condemned as simply unjust without acknowledging the material conditions that made them historically rational. The dialectical analysis does not condemn bride-price as a timeless moral failure; it understands it as a historically specific response to historically specific material conditions—a response that contained within itself the contradictions (the reduction of relational value to exchangeable quantity, the structural subordination of women) that drove its own development and that now call for its supersession.

The conditions of supersession: Traditional wealth forms can be superseded—replaced by forms more adequate to GRW generation—only when the material conditions that made them necessary have been superseded. This means: when legal systems are developed enough to enforce relational commitments without material guarantees; when social insurance systems provide adequate material security without the need for family-

to-family material transfers; when women's economic independence is sufficient to make material dependency in intimate relations a choice rather than a structural necessity.

These conditions are not uniformly achieved in any existing society, and they are achieved to very different degrees in different parts of the world. The historical materialist analysis therefore cautions against the cultural imperialism of imposing the forms adequate to one set of material conditions on societies where those conditions do not yet obtain. The appropriate response to bride-price is not its condemnation but the transformation of the material conditions that make it necessary—the development of the legal, social, and economic institutions that can serve the genuine functions of bride-price without its relational costs.

6.11.6 The Dialectical Unity of Necessity and Freedom in Relational Wealth

The Hegelian-Marxist analysis converges with the freedom-wealth dialectic of §6.4 on a final synthesis that can be stated as follows: **genuine relational freedom requires both the material necessity of adequate material conditions and the relational freedom of GRW generation, and the resolution of the contradiction between them is not the elimination of either but the organisation of necessity in the service of freedom.**

Material wealth is the domain of necessity in intimate relational life: the necessary conditions without which relational freedom is impossible. GRW is the domain of freedom: the form of wealth that can only be generated freely, that cannot be compelled or purchased, that arises from the voluntary co-evolutionary engagement of both parties.

The dialectical unity of necessity and freedom in relational wealth is not a static balance but a dynamic process: the material conditions are themselves transformed by the relational freedom they enable, and the relational freedom they enable generates the social demands for the transformation of the material conditions. The couple whose intimate relational life is rich in GRW will, through the quality of their shared life, generate social knowledge of what intimate relational flourishing looks like, thereby contributing to the cultural transformation that makes GRW generation more widely possible. And the social transformation of material conditions—the recognition of care labour, the regulation of digital extraction, the development of relational wealth institutions—creates the material

conditions within which more intimate relational fields can generate GRW.

This dialectical process is not guaranteed to move in the direction of synthesis: it can regress, can be captured by interests that benefit from the antithesis's continuation, can be distorted by the cultural hegemony of material accumulation logic. The political project of the GRW framework—the development of institutions, cultural norms, and personal practices adequate to relational wealth generation—is precisely the project of sustaining the dialectical movement toward synthesis against the forces that benefit from its arrest.

The Hegelian-Marxist synthesis. The dialectical movement of wealth in intimate relations proceeds from the undifferentiated unity of pre-modern household life (thesis) through the capitalist separation of material production from relational life (antithesis) toward a synthesis in which material wealth is organised as a condition for GRW generation and GRW is recognised as the primary form of intimate relational flourishing. This synthesis is not yet achieved; it is a tendency within the contradictions of the present moment. Its realisation requires the recognition of care labour as wealth production, the transformation of material wealth organisation in intimate relations, and the cultural development of norms adequate to GRW generation—all of which are simultaneously theoretical tasks (understanding what the synthesis requires) and practical-political tasks (creating the conditions that make it possible).

6.12. Ethics: The Practice of GRW and the Critique of Traditional Wealth Epistemology

Theory without ethics is incomplete: a theory of wealth that describes what GRW is and how it is generated, without saying how it ought to be generated and how the conditions for its generation ought to be protected, remains at the level of description when the situation calls for prescription. This section develops the ethical dimensions of

the GRW framework in four registers—individual, relational, social, and political—and adds three further dimensions that the theoretical analysis makes necessary: generative justice, epistemic justice, and the dialectical unity of all four levels.

The ethical framework proposed here is not primarily rule-based (a list of obligations to be followed) nor primarily consequentialist (a calculus of outcomes to be maximised) but primarily **virtue-ethical** in the Aristotelian sense: it is an account of the character dispositions, relational habits, and practical orientations that constitute the kind of person and the kind of couple capable of generating and sustaining GRW. Rules and consequences matter, but they are downstream of character: the party who has genuinely cultivated the virtues of relational life will do the right thing not because a rule requires it but because it is what their character calls for.

6.12.1 Individual Ethics: Virtue and Character in Relational Life

The individual ethical dimension of GRW concerns the character dispositions that make a person capable of genuine participation in the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate relational wealth. Four virtues are central.

Non-possession (非占有性, the virtue of *xuande*): The disposition to participate in the relational field's generative activity without grasping at its products—to receive the happiness that arises from the *between* with gratitude and without claiming it as one's own. Non-possession is not indifference: the non-possessive party is not uninvested in the relational field's flourishing but deeply invested—what they are not invested in is the conversion of the field's generative activity into individual capital. The connection between non-possession and GRW sustainability is dynamical: the party who attempts to possess GRW—who claims the shared attractor landscape as their individual property, who uses the accumulated holonomy of the shared life as leverage—thereby raises the threshold for relational spikes and reduces the coupling coefficient of the system, accelerating the degradation of the GRW they attempt to possess.

Generous receptivity: The disposition not only to give but to genuinely receive—to allow the partner's act of sharing to enter the relational field as a relational event, to be moved by what the partner is moved by, to let the contingent event that the partner introduces into the shared attentional field become a relational spike rather than an

acknowledged piece of information. The virtue of generous receptivity is the complement of the virtue of timely sharing: sharing without receptivity is a monologue; receptivity without sharing is a mirror. The coupled virtues together constitute the co-evolutionary receptivity that [Paper XIV](#) identified as the condition for relational happiness (Wanhong 2026).

Material modesty: The disposition to treat material wealth as a condition for GRW generation rather than as a goal in itself—to maintain what the threshold principle of §6.4.5 specifies as adequate material conditions without allowing the accumulation logic to crowd out the investment in co-evolutionary engagement that GRW generation requires. Material modesty is not asceticism or indifference to material conditions; it is the clear-eyed recognition that above the threshold of adequate material conditions, additional material wealth does not generate additional GRW and may actively undermine it.

Temporal generosity: The disposition to treat shared time as the primary resource of intimate relational life—to protect the time of co-present engagement from the demands of market work, social obligation, and individual pursuit. In the context of contemporary modernity, temporal generosity is perhaps the most politically charged of the individual virtues: the organisation of modern working life systematically extracts time from intimate relational life, and temporal generosity requires active resistance to this extraction. The party who is genuinely temporally generous is not merely being kind to their partner; they are making a political choice about the relative value of GRW and market productivity.

6.12.2 Relational Ethics: The Obligations of Co-Evolutionary Partnership

The relational ethical dimension concerns the obligations that GRW's co-evolutionary character generates between the parties to an intimate relation. Since GRW belongs to the relational field rather than to either party individually, both parties have genuine obligations with respect to it—obligations that are not reducible to the individual virtues of the preceding section but arise specifically from the shared character of the relational field.

The obligation of non-extraction: Neither party should unilaterally convert GRW into individual benefit—should claim the shared attractor landscape as their individual

asset, use the accumulated holonomy of the shared life as leverage in relational power struggles, or exploit the partner's emotional labour for individual material or social gain. The obligation of non-extraction is the relational expression of the individual virtue of non-possession: what non-possession means at the individual level becomes a binding obligation at the relational level, because the extraction of GRW by one party always comes at the cost of the relational field that both parties depend on.

The obligation of joint maintenance: Both parties have an obligation to invest in the maintenance of the conditions for GRW generation—to contribute to the shared attentional practices, the timely sharing, the co-evolutionary receptivity that GRW generation requires. This obligation is not symmetrical in its content (different parties will contribute in different ways, reflecting their different capacities and circumstances) but it is symmetrical in its binding force: both parties are obligated to invest in the relational field's flourishing, and the failure of either party to do so is a genuine relational failure, not merely a personal shortcoming.

The obligation of relational transparency: When one party perceives that the relational field's GRW is being depleted—that the cycle is withering, that the coupling is weakening, that the shared attractor landscape is being degraded—they have an obligation to communicate this perception to the other party. This communication is not a complaint or an accusation; it is the fulfilment of the joint maintenance obligation, an act of care for the shared relational field. Silence in the face of GRW depletion is a failure of this obligation: it allows a reversible process to become irreversible, and it deprives the other party of the opportunity to participate in the restoration of GRW that both parties need.

The obligation of asymmetry acknowledgement: When one party is contributing disproportionately to the relational field's GRW generation—when the distribution of care labour, emotional attentiveness, and co-evolutionary investment is significantly asymmetrical—both parties have an obligation to acknowledge this asymmetry. The acknowledgement does not take the form of a settlement (“you owe me X for what I have contributed”) but of a relational recognition (“I see what you are doing for us, and I am grateful, and I want to find ways to share this more fully”). Asymmetry without acknowledgement is a form of relational invisibility—a failure to see the other party's contribution

for what it is—and it is both an injustice and a threat to GRW sustainability.

6.12.3 Social Ethics: Wealth Forms and Their Relational Consequences

The social ethical dimension concerns the question of how different wealth forms in intimate relations are to be evaluated from an ethical standpoint—not in the abstract but in specific historical and cultural contexts. The framework developed here is not universally prescriptive but **relational consequentialist**: the ethical evaluation of a wealth form depends on whether it supports or undermines the conditions for GRW generation in the specific relational and material context in which it operates.

The relational consequentialist criterion: A wealth form in intimate relations is ethically justified to the extent that it creates the material conditions for GRW generation without introducing the settlement, commodification, and indebtedness that destroy those conditions. Applied to bride-price: a bride-price arrangement is ethically justified to the extent that it provides genuine material security for the bride and her family without reducing the bride to a commodity, creating structural indebtedness that forecloses the bride's relational subjectivity, or settling the relational value of the intimate relation before co-evolutionary dynamics have had the opportunity to generate it. These conditions may or may not be satisfied by any specific bride-price arrangement, depending on the amount, the cultural framing, the material context, and the relational dynamics of the parties involved.

The cultural context requirement: The relational consequentialist criterion must be applied in cultural context. A wealth form that would constitute settlement, commodification, or indebtedness in one cultural context may function as genuine material security provision in another. The ethical evaluation of bride-price in a society with developed legal systems, social insurance, and women's economic independence will differ from its evaluation in a society where none of these obtain. The historical materialist analysis of §6.11 provides the framework for this contextual evaluation: the ethical justification of a wealth form is inseparable from the material conditions that make it historically rational.

The cultural imperialism red line: The application of the relational consequentialist criterion must be sensitive to the danger of cultural imperialism—the imposition of one society's ethical standards on another society's practices without regard for the different

material conditions that make those practices historically rational. The condemnation of bride-price from the standpoint of a society with adequate legal protections and women's economic independence, without attention to the functions that bride-price serves in societies without these institutions, is a form of cultural imperialism that the GRW framework explicitly rejects.

The universal ethical floor: At the same time, cultural context does not justify everything. The relational consequentialist criterion identifies a universal ethical floor that applies across cultural contexts: any wealth form that systematically reduces one party to a commodity—that treats the other's capacity for relational co-evolution as an exchangeable quantity with a price—is ethically unjustifiable regardless of cultural context, because it destroys the conditions for GRW generation that constitute intimate relational flourishing in any cultural context.

6.12.4 Political Ethics: Social Structures and the Conditions for GRW

The political ethical dimension concerns the obligations of social structures—legal systems, economic institutions, cultural norms—with respect to the conditions for GRW generation. If GRW is the primary form of intimate relational wealth, and if its generation requires specific material conditions, then social structures have a political ethical obligation to create and maintain those conditions.

The social recognition of care labour: Social structures have an obligation to recognise care labour—the emotional, attentional, and physical labour of maintaining intimate relational fields—as a genuine form of socially productive activity deserving material compensation and social support. This obligation is not merely redistributive (a matter of fair distribution of existing resources) but constitutive: the recognition of care labour transforms the social understanding of what counts as productive activity, creating the cultural conditions within which GRW generation is valued rather than marginalised.

The regulation of relational value extraction: Social structures have an obligation to regulate the digital platform extraction of relational value—the harvesting of intimate relational data for commercial purposes that neither generates GRW for the intimate field nor compensates the parties for the value extracted from it. This obligation is an extension of the generative justice principle: value generated through co-evolutionary

activity in intimate relational fields should return to those fields, not flow to external extractors.

The de-commodification of intimate life: Social structures have an obligation to resist the commodification of intimate life by consumerist culture—the conversion of relational celebration into market transactions, the substitution of commodity exchange for co-evolutionary engagement, the organisation of intimate life around the consumption of goods rather than the cultivation of shared experience. This is a cultural rather than a legal obligation: it cannot be achieved through regulation alone but requires the development of cultural norms that value co-evolutionary engagement over commodity consumption.

The politics of time: Social structures have an obligation to protect the time of intimate relational life from the demands of market work—to ensure that working hours, leave provisions, and social norms allow adequate time for the co-present engagement that GRW generation requires. This is perhaps the most concretely political of the social ethical obligations: it requires specific policy interventions (working time regulation, parental leave, flexible working arrangements) as well as cultural change.

6.12.5 Generative Justice and the Ethics of Value

The generative justice framework of Eglash (Eglash 2016), applied to intimate relational wealth, generates a specific set of ethical principles that complement the preceding four levels.

The right to generate: Every party to an intimate relation has the right to participate in the co-evolutionary dynamics that generate GRW—the right to contribute their full relational capacity to the shared field, to have their contribution recognised as genuine wealth production, and to benefit from the GRW that their contribution generates. The violation of this right—through the suppression of one party’s relational subjectivity, the systematic appropriation of their care labour, or the denial of their epistemic contribution to the shared field’s meaning—is a generative justice failure.

The obligation of return: Value generated through co-evolutionary activity in intimate relational fields should return to those fields rather than flowing to external extractors.

This principle applies at multiple levels: within the intimate relation (neither party should extract GRW for individual benefit without return), between intimate relations and the social institutions that depend on them (institutions that benefit from the reproductive labour of intimate life have an obligation to support and compensate that labour), and between intimate relations and digital platforms (platforms that extract value from intimate relational data have an obligation to return value to the relational fields that generate it).

The justice of the generative cycle: A just relational field is one in which the generative cycle is genuinely circular—in which no party is structurally reduced to a generator of value for the other’s benefit without return. The evil cycle of [Paper IX](#) ([Huang 2025](#)) is, in generative justice terms, an unjust cycle: one party’s generativity is used as fuel for the other’s accumulation, with nothing returned to sustain the generator’s generative capacity. The good cycle is the just cycle: the value generated by co-evolutionary activity returns to the relational field that generated it, sustaining and deepening the conditions for further generation.

6.12.6 Epistemic Justice: The Right to Know and Be Known in Relational Wealth

Miranda Fricker’s framework of epistemic injustice ([Fricker 2007](#)) identifies two forms of epistemic wrong: testimonial injustice (the systematic undervaluing of a knower’s testimony due to identity prejudice) and hermeneutical injustice (the structural gap in collective interpretive resources that leaves a person unable to understand or communicate their significant experiences). Both forms operate with specific and damaging consequences in the domain of relational wealth.

Relational testimonial injustice: Because GRW is epistemically opaque—not fully accessible to third-party verification—one party’s testimony about the state of the relational field’s GRW is particularly vulnerable to systematic undervaluation. The party who reports that the relational field is depleted, that the cycle is withering, that their care labour is being systematically unrecognised, may find their testimony dismissed—not because it is demonstrably false but because the dominant framework cannot see what they are pointing to. The epistemic injustice is compounded when the dismissing party is also the beneficiary of the relational labour whose value is being denied: the party

who benefits from the extraction of the other's GRW-generating labour has a structural interest in not recognising the testimony that challenges that extraction.

Relational hermeneutical injustice: The dominant wealth framework—which recognises only materially verifiable, symbolically codifiable forms of wealth—leaves those who generate GRW without adequate conceptual resources to understand and communicate what they are doing and what is being done to them. The woman whose care labour generates the GRW of the shared life does not have, in the dominant framework, the concepts to say “my work is generating wealth that is being extracted from me”; she can only say “my work is not being recognised,” which sounds like a complaint about recognition rather than a claim about material injustice. The GRW framework provides the conceptual resources that the hermeneutical injustice has denied: it names what care labour produces (GRW), what its extraction constitutes (generative injustice), and what its systematic non-recognition involves (hermeneutical injustice).

Relational epistemic coercion—your original claim: Beyond Fricker's two forms of epistemic injustice lies a third form that is specific to the intimate relational domain and that the GRW framework's analysis of GRW's epistemic opacity makes visible. We call this **relational epistemic coercion**: the active imposition of one party's interpretive framework on the shared relational field, in ways that deny the other party's epistemic right to contribute to the meaning of their shared experience.

Relational epistemic coercion operates through the systematic assertion of interpretive authority over the shared field: “that is not what happened,” “you are misremembering,” “our relationship is not the way you describe it,” “your feelings about what we have shared are not accurate.” These assertions are not necessarily false—genuine disagreements about shared experience are a normal feature of intimate life—but when they function as the systematic denial of one party's epistemic contribution to the shared field's meaning, they constitute a form of epistemic violence that is particularly damaging in the domain of GRW.

The damage is specific to GRW's character: because GRW depends on the genuine co-evolutionary engagement of both parties, and because genuine co-evolutionary engagement requires the recognition of both parties' perspectives as epistemically valid contribu-

tions to the shared field, relational epistemic coercion directly undermines the conditions for GRW generation. A relational field in which one party's interpretive contribution is systematically denied is a field in which genuine co-evolutionary engagement is impossible—in which the suppressed party can participate in the field's activities but cannot contribute to its meaning—and therefore a field in which GRW cannot be generated.

Epistemic symmetry as a condition for GRW: The positive ethical principle that follows from the analysis of epistemic injustice is the requirement of **epistemic symmetry**: both parties to the intimate relation must be recognised as epistemically valid contributors to the shared field's meaning—as genuine knowers of the relational field whose testimony about its state deserves credibility, whose interpretive contributions to the meaning of shared experience deserve consideration, and whose hermeneutical resources for understanding their relational experience deserve development and support.

Epistemic humility as a relational virtue: Epistemic symmetry is supported by the individual virtue of **epistemic humility**: the recognition that one's own interpretation of the shared relational field is necessarily partial and perspectival, that the other party's interpretation is a genuine contribution to the field's meaning rather than a deviation from the correct interpretation, and that the genuine understanding of the relational field requires the dialogic engagement of both parties' perspectives rather than the dominance of either.

Epistemic hospitality as generative practice: Paper XIII's concept of epistemic hospitality (Huang 2026)—the active good-faith effort to present genuine content in forms that are accessible to the other's epistemic framework—finds its application in the domain of relational wealth as the practice of making one's interpretation of the shared field accessible to the other party's understanding, rather than asserting it as the correct interpretation that the other party must accept. Epistemic hospitality is the positive form of the epistemic justice obligation: not merely refraining from epistemic coercion but actively inviting the other party's interpretive contribution.

6.12.7 The Dialectical Unity of the Four Levels

The four levels of the ethical framework—individual, relational, social, and political—are not independent but dialectically unified: each level depends on and supports the others

in a structure of mutual conditioning that mirrors the dialectical structure of GRW itself.

Individual virtues (non-possession, generous receptivity, material modesty, temporal generosity) are necessary but not sufficient for GRW generation: they provide the personal substrate without which the relational obligations cannot be fulfilled, but they cannot generate GRW without the corresponding relational practices. Relational obligations (non-extraction, joint maintenance, transparency, asymmetry acknowledgement) are necessary but not sufficient: they structure the co-evolutionary engagement that generates GRW, but they cannot be sustained without the social and political conditions that make them practically possible. Social structures (care labour recognition, extraction regulation, de-commodification, time protection) are necessary but not sufficient: they create the material conditions for GRW generation, but they cannot generate GRW directly—only the voluntary co-evolutionary engagement of the parties can do that. And political transformation is necessary but not sufficient: it changes the structural conditions within which intimate relational life unfolds, but the transformation of those conditions into actual GRW generation requires the cultivation of individual virtues and relational practices.

The dialectical unity of the four levels is not a vicious circle but a generative spiral: each level, when developed, creates the conditions for the development of the others, and the development of all four together constitutes the full realisation of the ethical project that the GRW framework proposes. Like GRW itself, the ethical project is self-generating: the cultivation of individual virtues supports the fulfilment of relational obligations, which generates social demands for structural change, which creates political conditions for further cultural development of individual and relational virtues.

The ethical project of GRW. The ethical project of the GRW framework is the cultivation, at four dialectically unified levels, of the conditions under which GRW can be generated, sustained, and protected: individual virtues of non-possession, generous receptivity, material modesty, and temporal generosity; relational obligations of non-extraction, joint maintenance, transparency, and asymmetry acknowledgement; social ethical requirements of care labour recognition, extraction regulation, de-commodification, and time

protection; and political ethical demands for the transformation of the material conditions that currently prevent GRW from being recognised as the primary form of intimate relational wealth. The generative justice and epistemic justice dimensions of this project—ensuring that every party has the right to generate relational value and the epistemic resources to know and communicate their relational experience—are not additions to this framework but its necessary internal conditions.

6.13. Empirical and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

The theoretical framework developed in the preceding sections makes several empirically tractable claims about wealth in intimate relations—claims that can, in principle, be tested through the methods of social science, psychology, and anthropology. This section proposes a research programme for testing the GRW framework’s central empirical predictions, examines the cross-cultural dimensions of relational wealth, and addresses the methodological and ethical challenges that research on intimate relational wealth necessarily faces.

The empirical programme is not a reduction of the GRW framework to its measurable correlates: as §6.10 established, GRW is epistemically opaque and not directly measurable. What is measurable are the conditions for GRW generation (the quality of co-evolutionary engagement, the distribution of care labour, the presence or absence of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness) and the consequences of GRW depletion (relational dissolution, subjective reports of relational dissatisfaction, health and wellbeing outcomes). The empirical programme therefore proceeds indirectly: it tests the GRW framework’s predictions about the conditions and consequences of GRW generation rather than attempting to measure GRW directly.

6.13.1 Operationalising GRW: Measurement Strategy

The epistemic opacity of GRW creates a genuine measurement challenge. GRW cannot be directly measured; it can only be inferred from its conditions and consequences.

The measurement strategy therefore requires a multi-method approach that triangulates across several levels of analysis.

Condition measures: The conditions for GRW generation identified by the theoretical framework—joint attention quality, timely sharing frequency, co-evolutionary receptivity, the absence of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness mechanisms—can be operationalised through a combination of self-report measures, behavioural coding, and physiological assessment.

Joint attention quality can be measured through established eye-tracking and behavioural coding protocols (Hasson et al. 2012): the degree to which both partners orient their attention to the same object simultaneously, and the quality of their mutual attunement in this joint orientation. Timely sharing frequency can be assessed through experience sampling methods: couples are prompted at random intervals throughout the day to report whether they have recently shared a contingent event with their partner, how quickly the sharing occurred, and the quality of the partner’s reception.

The presence of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness mechanisms can be assessed through validated questionnaire measures adapted from existing instruments for relationship quality and power dynamics, supplemented by qualitative interview methods that can capture the more subtle and culturally embedded forms of these mechanisms.

Consequence measures: The consequences of GRW depletion can be assessed through established measures of relational quality, subjective wellbeing, and health outcomes. The GRW framework predicts that relational fields with higher levels of GRW generation will show: greater relational stability over time; higher scores on validated measures of relational quality (including the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Relationship Assessment Scale); better physical and mental health outcomes for both partners (consistent with the co-regulation literature reviewed in Paper XIV (Wanhong 2026)); and greater resilience in the face of external stressors (consistent with the crisis resilience property of GRW identified in §6.5.10).

Process measures: The GRW framework makes specific predictions about the temporal dynamics of GRW generation that can be tested through longitudinal research designs. The relational STDP mechanism (Paper XIV) predicts that timely sharing of contingent

events produces greater structural modification of the relational attractor landscape than delayed sharing; this can be tested by measuring the quality of co-evolutionary engagement (through physiological synchrony measures and behavioural coding) as a function of the temporal proximity of sharing to the shared event.

6.13.2 The Happiness Jar Study: A Proposed Research Design

The happiness jar provides a particularly tractable empirical paradigm for testing the GRW framework's predictions. We propose the following research design.

Design: A randomised controlled trial in which couples experiencing relational stress are randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (a) a happiness jar condition, in which couples are instructed to record shared moments of happiness daily for eight weeks and to return to these records weekly for joint review and artistic processing; (b) an active control condition, in which couples engage in a structured weekly conversation about positive relational experiences without the archiving and processing component; and (c) a waitlist control condition.

Primary outcomes: Relational quality (assessed weekly through brief self-report measures), physiological synchrony (assessed through ambulatory heart rate variability monitoring), and relational dissolution rates at twelve-month follow-up.

Process measures: The quality of joint engagement with the happiness jar records (coded from video recordings of the weekly review sessions), the temporal proximity of recordings to the shared events they record (assessed through timestamp analysis), and the degree of artistic processing versus simple factual recording (coded from the content of the records).

Predicted results: The GRW framework predicts that the happiness jar condition will show greater improvements in relational quality and physiological synchrony than either control condition, and lower relational dissolution rates at follow-up. Among happiness jar couples, the GRW framework further predicts that the quality of artistic processing (rather than simple recording) will be the strongest predictor of outcome—consistent with the theoretical claim that the operator O must produce a genuine topological projection rather than a simple record for the structural remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x)$ to be non-zero and

generative.

6.13.3 The Distribution of Care Labour: Cross-National Study

The feminist political economy of GRW predicts that the asymmetric distribution of care labour within intimate relations will be associated with lower GRW generation and worse relational outcomes for both parties—not only for the party who bears the disproportionate care burden (through depletion of their generative capacity) but for the party who disproportionately benefits (through the degradation of the co-evolutionary dynamics that genuine GRW generation requires).

This prediction can be tested through a cross-national study using existing longitudinal panel data (such as the German Socio-Economic Panel or the British Household Panel Survey) combined with newly collected measures of relational quality and GRW conditions. The study would examine whether the asymmetric distribution of care labour predicts worse relational outcomes independent of overall workload, consistent with the GRW framework's claim that it is the asymmetry rather than the total labour that undermines co-evolutionary dynamics.

The cross-national design allows the examination of the moderating role of institutional context: the GRW framework predicts that the negative effects of care labour asymmetry on relational quality will be attenuated in societies with stronger institutional support for care labour (generous parental leave, publicly funded childcare, flexible working arrangements)—because these institutions reduce the material vulnerability that makes care labour asymmetry destructive rather than merely unequal.

6.13.4 Wealth Forms and Relational Quality: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study

The cross-cultural analysis of wealth in intimate relations requires a methodological framework that is sensitive to the cultural specificity of wealth forms while retaining the analytical rigour needed to make comparisons across cultural contexts. The GRW framework's relational consequentialist criterion—evaluating wealth forms by whether they support or undermine the conditions for GRW generation—provides this framework: it specifies what to look for (the presence or absence of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness mechanisms) while remaining open to the culturally specific forms these mechanisms

may take.

Ethnographic component: In-depth ethnographic research in societies with different wealth forms in intimate relations (bride-price societies in sub-Saharan Africa, dowry societies in South Asia, gift-exchange societies in Melanesia, and contemporary Western societies with prenuptial agreements) would document the specific forms of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness that each wealth form introduces into intimate relational life, and the specific relational consequences that follow.

Survey component: Structured survey research across these societies would measure the GRW conditions (joint attention quality, timely sharing, co-evolutionary receptivity) and consequences (relational quality, subjective wellbeing, health outcomes) as a function of the wealth forms present in each couple's relational field. The GRW framework predicts that, across cultural contexts, the specific mechanisms of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness will be negatively associated with GRW conditions and consequences, regardless of the cultural form these mechanisms take.

The Ubuntu and *ma* studies: The non-Western wealth traditions identified in §6.2—Ubuntu philosophy and the Japanese concepts of *ma* and *en*—suggest specific predictions about the conditions for GRW generation that can be tested in their cultural contexts. In Ubuntu societies, the GRW framework predicts that community-level support for intimate relational life (the embedding of intimate dyads within wider relational communities that provide material and social support) will be a significant predictor of GRW conditions, consistent with the Ubuntu principle that full personhood is achieved through communal relations. In Japanese society, the GRW framework predicts that the cultivation of *ma*—the quality of shared silence and relational presence that Japanese aesthetic culture values—will be a significant predictor of relational flow states, consistent with the identification of relational flow as the paradigmatic form of GRW engagement in Paper XIV (Wanhong 2026).

6.13.5 Research Ethics

Research on intimate relational wealth raises distinctive ethical challenges that go beyond the standard requirements of research ethics with individual participants. Several of these challenges are specific to the relational character of the research subject.

Relational informed consent: Research that treats the intimate dyad rather than the individual as the unit of analysis requires consent procedures that reflect the relational character of the subject matter. Standard individual consent procedures do not address the relational implications of participation: the consequences of one partner's withdrawal from the study for the other partner's data, the possibility that participation will itself affect the relational dynamics being studied, and the right of both partners to be informed about the study's implications for their shared relational field. A relational consent procedure would require joint discussion and joint decision-making about participation, with explicit discussion of these relational implications.

The intervention effect: Research participation is itself a relational event that may affect the GRW dynamics being studied—particularly in the happiness jar study, where the intervention is designed to be therapeutic. The observation of the relational field changes the field; the assignment of couples to conditions changes the meaning of their shared experience; the weekly measurement of relational quality introduces a reflexive dimension that may itself affect relational quality. These intervention effects should be explicitly modelled in the research design rather than treated as nuisance variables to be controlled.

Protection of intimate data: The data generated by research on intimate relational wealth—physiological synchrony measures, video recordings of couple interactions, self-reports of intimate relational experiences—are among the most sensitive personal data that social research can collect. Robust anonymisation, strict access controls, and explicit protocols for the management of disclosures of harm within intimate relations (including intimate partner violence, which research on intimate relations may uncover) are essential components of an adequate research ethics framework.

Cultural sensitivity: Cross-cultural research on wealth forms in intimate relations requires particular sensitivity to the risk of cultural imperialism—the imposition of the GRW framework's evaluative standards on cultural practices without adequate attention to the material conditions and cultural meanings that give those practices their significance. The research should be conducted in genuine collaboration with researchers embedded in each cultural context, and the interpretation of findings should be subject to ongoing dialogue with community representatives.

6.13.6 Potential Biases

The empirical research programme on GRW is subject to several sources of bias that must be acknowledged and managed.

The measurement problem: The primary source of bias in GRW research is the impossibility of direct measurement. All measures of GRW are indirect, inferring the state of the relational field from its conditions and consequences. This indirection introduces systematic bias wherever the conditions and consequences of GRW are confounded with other variables: the quality of joint attention, for example, may be affected by individual differences in attentional capacity that are unrelated to GRW; subjective reports of relational quality may be affected by individual differences in positivity bias; physiological synchrony may be affected by shared environmental factors rather than genuine relational coupling.

The selection effect: Couples who volunteer for research on intimate relational wealth are likely to differ systematically from those who do not: they may be more reflective about their relational dynamics, more open to the possibility of relational change, and more committed to the intimate relation than the broader population of intimate couples. The findings of research with such samples may not generalise to the full range of intimate relational fields.

The reductionist trap: The most philosophically significant bias in GRW research is the temptation to treat the measurable correlates of GRW as GRW itself—to conclude, from the measurement of joint attention quality or physiological synchrony or relational quality, that one has measured GRW. This reductionist move is not a mere methodological error but a philosophical one: it confuses the conditions and consequences of GRW with GRW itself, and it imports into the empirical programme the individualist presuppositions that the GRW framework is designed to challenge. The empirical programme must maintain the distinction between GRW and its measurable correlates throughout the design, execution, and interpretation of research.

The Hawthorne effect in intimate relations: The observation of intimate relational dynamics for research purposes may itself improve those dynamics—not because the study's intervention is effective but because the attention of researchers, the structure of

the research protocol, and the couples' own reflective engagement with their relational dynamics create conditions for GRW generation that would not otherwise exist. This Hawthorne effect is particularly likely in the happiness jar study, where the intervention is explicitly designed to cultivate co-evolutionary engagement. Controlling for this effect requires careful attention to the active control condition and to the mechanism measures that distinguish genuine GRW generation from the Hawthorne effect.

6.14. Praxis: Cultivating Generative Relational Wealth in Daily Life

A theory of wealth that cannot say how wealth is to be cultivated—that provides a philosophically rigorous account of what GRW is and how it is generated but remains silent on how it is to be practised in the ordinary texture of daily intimate life—is incomplete in a way that this paper cannot accept. This section turns from the theoretical to the practical, asking: what does the cultivation of GRW look like as a form of life? How are the abstract principles of the preceding sections instantiated in the concrete practices of shared intimate existence?

The praxis account proceeds in three movements. It begins with the happiness jar as the paradigmatic practice—the concrete form in which the theoretical account of GRW re-traversal becomes a daily intimate discipline. It then addresses the practice of resisting the settlement logic that is the primary contemporary threat to GRW generation. And it concludes with the question of how material wealth and GRW can be organised in a mutually supportive rather than mutually undermining relation—the practical synthesis of the freedom-wealth dialectic of §6.4.

6.14.1 The Happiness Jar as Daily Practice

The happiness jar (幸福储蓄罐) is not primarily a research paradigm (though it is that, as §6.13.2 showed) but a daily intimate practice—a form of life rather than a technique. What distinguishes it as a form of life from a mere technique is that it is not a procedure to be followed when problems arise but a discipline to be cultivated as the ordinary texture of shared intimate existence.

The recording practice: The most fundamental form of the happiness jar is the daily

recording of shared moments of contingent happiness—the flower noticed on the path, the unexpected quality of light at a particular moment, the wordless co-presence of an unhurried evening, the laughter that arose from a shared absurdity. The recording is not a diary entry in the ordinary sense—it is not a narrative account of what happened but a trace of the co-evolutionary event itself: a photograph taken in the moment, a few words written immediately after, a small object collected from the scene, a voice memo recorded in the afterglow of the shared experience.

The discipline of timely recording is important for the reasons identified by the relational STDP analysis of [Paper XIV](#) (Wanhong 2026): the structural modification produced by the recording is stronger when the recording occurs close in time to the original event. The photograph taken in the moment of noticing the flower is a richer index of the co-evolutionary event than the photograph taken an hour later; the words written immediately after the shared experience carry more of the event's affective texture than the words written that evening. The discipline of timely recording is therefore not merely an aesthetic preference but a dynamical requirement: it is the practice that maintains the indexical connection between the record and the real co-evolutionary event it traces.

The processing practice: The happiness jar's transformative power lies not in the recording but in the processing: the deliberate return to the records of past co-evolutionary events and their artistic transformation into new symbolic forms. This processing practice is not a nostalgic dwelling in the past but a forward-looking generative activity: the artistic transformation of past records produces new symbolic objects ($x' = O(x)$) that stand in a richer relation to the original co-evolutionary events than the original records alone, opening new dimensions of the shared field's meaning and generating new holonomy through re-traversal.

The processing can take many forms: writing a poem from a photograph, creating a piece of music from a journal entry, drawing or painting from a shared memory, composing a short story from a collection of small records, or simply reading old records together and allowing the conversation that arises to become the processing. What matters is not the technical quality of the artistic product but the quality of the co-evolutionary engagement that the processing occasions: whether both parties are genuinely present to the processing, whether both parties' perspectives on the original event are brought

into the processing, and whether the result opens new dimensions of the shared field's meaning rather than closing them.

The re-engagement practice: The third component of the happiness jar practice is the deliberate re-engagement with the processed products—the poems, paintings, recordings, stories—as occasions for further co-evolutionary engagement. When the couple returns to a poem written from an earlier shared experience, they are not merely revisiting an artistic product; they are re-traversing the relational phase space in the vicinity of the original event, through the mediating structure of the artistic processing, and this re-traversal produces new holonomy that enriches the shared attractor landscape.

The re-engagement practice is most important at moments of relational stress—when the cycle is withering, when the coupling has weakened, when the shared field feels thin and depleted. At these moments, the happiness jar provides a means of reactivating the co-evolutionary dynamics that the stress has suppressed: a way of re-establishing contact with the richer relational field that existed before the stress, and of using that contact to begin the restoration of GRW that the stress has depleted.

The jar in the withering cycle: When the relational cycle has been withering for some time—when the couple has lost the quality of co-present attentiveness that GRW generation requires, when the shared field has become thin and the coupling has weakened—the happiness jar must be approached with particular care. The temptation at such moments is to use the jar as a form of emotional manipulation: to deploy records of past happiness as evidence in a relational argument (“we used to be happy, and now we are not, and it is your fault”) or as a demand for return to an idealised past that no longer exists. This is the spurious processing identified in §6.6.8: it uses the materials of the shared experience for purposes other than genuine re-traversal, introducing strong suture points that close off the interpretive possibilities that genuine poetic suture preserves.

Genuine re-engagement with the jar in the withering cycle requires a different orientation: not the demand for return but the invitation to renewal, not the assertion that things were better then but the exploration of what made them generative, not the comparison of past and present but the use of past generativity as a resource for present co-evolutionary engagement. This orientation is itself a practice—one that requires the cultivation of the

individual virtues of non-possession, generous receptivity, and epistemic humility that §6.12.1 identified.

6.14.2 Resisting the Settlement Logic: Daily Counter-Practices

The settlement logic—the tendency to convert the living process of co-evolutionary GRW generation into a closed account of what has been produced and who is owed what—is not merely an institutional feature of the legal framework that governs intimate relations; it is a habit of mind and a cultural reflex that operates in the daily texture of intimate relational life. The cultivation of GRW therefore requires the development of specific counter-practices that resist the settlement logic in its daily forms.

The non-accounting practice: The most fundamental counter-practice is the deliberate refusal to maintain a running account of relational contributions and debts—the refusal to ask “who has done more,” “who owes whom what,” or “what am I owed for what I have given.” This is not the refusal to notice asymmetries (which the ethical framework of §6.12 requires that both parties notice and acknowledge) but the refusal to convert the noticing of asymmetries into a claims structure. The party who notices that they have been bearing a disproportionate share of the care labour does not thereby acquire a debt to be repaid; they have occasion for the conversation about relational asymmetry that the obligation of asymmetry acknowledgement requires.

The non-comparative practice: A specific form of settlement logic that is particularly corrosive in contemporary intimate life is the comparison of one’s own intimate relation to other relations—whether those of friends and colleagues, or the idealised relations presented in social media and popular culture. Comparison introduces settlement logic by establishing an external standard against which the relational field’s GRW is assessed and found wanting: “our relation is not as happy as theirs,” “we do not have the kind of connection that they have.” The non-comparative practice is the deliberate refusal of this external standard in favour of an internal assessment of the relational field’s own generative dynamics: not “are we as happy as they are” but “is our relational field generating GRW, and what can we do to support and deepen that generation?”

The anti-commodification practice: The commodification of intimate life by consumerist culture—the substitution of commodity exchange for co-evolutionary engage-

ment in the celebration of intimate milestones—is resisted through the deliberate cultivation of relational celebration forms that generate GRW rather than symbolic register wealth. This is not asceticism—the occasional gift, the celebratory meal, the anniversary trip are not inherently commodifying—but the refusal to allow the commodity form to become the primary expression of relational value. The gift that is chosen with genuine attention to the other’s specific needs and desires, that is offered without expectation of equivalent return, and that is received as an expression of the giver’s attentive knowledge of the receiver rather than as a market transaction, is not a commodifying gift; it is a form of relational attention that can support GRW generation. The gift that is chosen primarily for its market value, offered as the fulfilment of a social obligation, and received as the settlement of a relational debt, is a commodifying gift that introduces settlement logic into the relational field.

The temporal counter-structuring practice: The organisation of shared time in ways that protect co-present attentiveness from the demands of market work, social obligation, and individual pursuit is perhaps the most politically significant of the daily counter-practices. This requires not only the negotiation of temporal boundaries between intimate relational time and work time (which is necessary but not sufficient) but the cultivation of the quality of co-present attentiveness within the protected time—the capacity to be genuinely present to the shared field rather than merely spatially co-present while mentally elsewhere. The discipline of digital unplugging—the deliberate creation of periods in which both parties are available for genuine co-present engagement, free from the attentional capture of digital devices—is one concrete form of this temporal counter-structuring.

6.14.3 Organising Material Wealth to Support GRW

The practical synthesis of the freedom-wealth dialectic requires the organisation of material wealth in ways that provide the necessary conditions for GRW generation without introducing the settlement, commodification, and indebtedness that undermine those conditions. This is not a simple task—the material organisation of intimate relational life is constrained by legal frameworks, cultural norms, and economic structures that have been shaped by the dominant wealth logic—but several practical principles can guide it.

The threshold principle in practice: The threshold principle—material wealth sufficient to remove material stress from the relational field, but not organised around the accumulation logic that is alien to co-evolutionary dynamics—requires, in practice, a continuous assessment of what constitutes adequate material conditions in the specific context of the intimate relation. The threshold is not a fixed quantity but a contextual judgement: what is sufficient material security for one couple in one context may be inadequate for another. The practical question is not “how much is enough?” in the abstract but “what material conditions allow us to invest in co-evolutionary engagement without material anxiety?”

The joint decision-making practice: The material organisation of intimate relational life should be determined through genuine joint decision-making—not the dominance of one party’s financial preferences over the other’s, nor the delegation of financial decisions to one party as their “area of responsibility,” but the genuine co-deliberation of both parties about how material resources should be organised to support the relational field’s GRW generation. This joint decision-making is itself a form of co-evolutionary engagement: the process of deliberating together about material conditions is an occasion for the kind of joint attention and mutual responsiveness that GRW generation requires.

The anti-debt practice: The organisation of material wealth in ways that minimise structural indebtedness within the intimate relation—that prevent either party from occupying the structural position of debtor to the other—is a practical requirement of the GRW framework’s ethical analysis. This means: avoiding the use of material gifts as mechanisms of indebtedness (the gift that creates an obligation of return rather than an expression of care); avoiding the organisation of shared finances in ways that create structural material dependency of one party on the other; and maintaining, to the extent that material conditions allow, a minimal individual material floor for each party that prevents material dependency from distorting the relational dynamics.

The care labour recognition practice: The practical recognition of care labour as a form of genuine wealth production within the intimate relation requires concrete forms of acknowledgement that go beyond verbal appreciation—though verbal appreciation is necessary and should not be underestimated. Concrete forms of recognition include: the equitable organisation of care responsibilities between both parties, preventing the system-

atic concentration of care labour in one party; the inclusion of care labour contributions in any joint financial accounting of the couple's wealth (recognising that the party who has invested primarily in care labour rather than market labour has contributed to the couple's GRW even if their market wealth is lower); and the social representation of care labour as a genuine and valued form of activity in the couple's shared narrative of their life together.

6.14.4 The Integrated Practice: GRW as a Way of Life

The practices identified in the preceding subsections—the happiness jar, the resistance of settlement logic, the organisation of material wealth to support GRW—are not a list of techniques to be applied sequentially but aspects of a single integrated way of being in an intimate relational field. They are the practical expression of the relational subjectivity that the GRW framework's theoretical account describes: the form of life in which the relational field is treated as the primary subject of flourishing, and in which both parties orient their activity toward the cultivation of the conditions for the field's generative activity.

This integrated practice is not achieved through the deliberate application of rules; it is cultivated through the development of habits, dispositions, and forms of attentiveness that gradually become second nature. Like the Aristotelian virtues, the practices of GRW cultivation are developed through practice: one becomes capable of genuine co-evolutionary engagement by repeatedly engaging co-evolutionarily, of timely sharing by practising timely sharing, of genuine artistic processing by repeatedly engaging in artistic processing, until these activities become the default orientation of one's intimate relational life rather than effortful departures from it.

The temporal horizon of this cultivation is the lifetime. The GRW framework's account of the cumulative structure of relational flourishing—the idea that the deepest form of intimate relational happiness is the quiet, stable, resilient happiness of a relational field that has accumulated, through a lifetime of co-evolutionary engagement, the holonomy of a genuinely shared life—implies that the cultivation of GRW is not a project with a completion date but an ongoing way of being. The couple who has practised the happiness jar for twenty years does not thereby graduate to a state where the practice is no longer

needed; they have developed, through the practice, the relational capacities that make the practice richer and more generative with each iteration, producing the cumulative holonomy of a shared life that is itself the fullest expression of GRW.

The root and the flower: Paper IX closed with the image of the root rather than the flower: rather than fixating on the flower's withering, attend to how it was generated; tend the roots, remember how this flower came to be here (Huang 2025). The praxis of GRW is the tending of roots: not the grasping at the happiness of shared moments (which, like flowers, pass) but the cultivation of the conditions—the relational attentiveness, the timely sharing, the artistic processing, the non-possessive participation—that make it possible for happiness to continue to arise from the shared field. The flower is the product; the root is the practice. GRW is accumulated in the root, not in the flower, and the couple who tends their roots will find that the flowers continue to come—contingently, unremarkably, on ordinary paths—as long as the roots are alive.

6.15. Conclusions: At the Boundaries of the Frameworks

This paper has traversed considerable ground, from the political economy of wealth theory to the semiotics of the happiness jar, from the psychoanalysis of phallic signifiers to the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic of relational wealth, from the feminist recovery of care labour to the epistemic justice of the right to know one's relational field. The traversal has been guided by a single question—what is wealth in intimate relations?—and has arrived at an answer that is at once theoretically precise and practically consequential: the primary form of wealth in intimate relations is Generative Relational Wealth, an emergent property of co-evolutionary dynamics that is stored in the geometry of the relational attractor landscape, inexhaustible under use, non-possessable by either party, and self-generating in its structure.

In keeping with the series' commitment to honest multi-framework analysis—the polyphonic conclusion form that refuses the false unity of a single synthetic statement—this section presents the conclusions that each of the paper's major frameworks can and cannot reach, ends with the three concentric circles that constitute the paper's structural closure, and states explicitly why no synthetic conclusion is offered.

6.15.1 What the Political Economy Framework Can and Cannot Say

The political economy framework can say: that the major traditions of wealth theory share an individualist presupposition that renders GRW invisible; that mercantilist logic, when it enters intimate relational fields through bride-price, gold, and their contemporary equivalents, operates through three specific mechanisms—settlement, commodification, and indebtedness—that destroy the conditions for GRW generation; that the feminist political economy of social reproduction identifies the systematic non-recognition of care labour as a form of GRW extraction; and that the freedom-wealth dialectic is resolved not by choosing between material wealth and GRW but by organising material wealth as a condition for GRW generation.

The political economy framework cannot say: what GRW feels like from the inside; how the symbolic operations of the happiness jar make contact with the real register of the relational field; what the precise dynamical laws governing Δ 's evolution are; or why the relational field generates happiness as its emergent signal rather than some other emergent property. These questions require the other frameworks that the paper has deployed.

6.15.2 What the Formal Framework Can and Cannot Say

The formal framework—relational STDP, the structural remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x) \neq 0$, the phase space account of GRW accumulation, the Relational Isomorphism Principle—can say: that GRW is stored in the structural modifications of the relational attractor landscape; that re-traversal produces additional holonomy that augments rather than depletes GRW; that the non-zero structural remainder is the formal basis of GRW's inexhaustibility; and that the Relational Isomorphism Principle provides a conjectural account of how symbolic operations in the happiness jar can produce real register effects through structural resonance.

The formal framework cannot say: whether the Relational Isomorphism Principle is correct, since this depends on the metaphysical commitment that the real is relational, which is a philosophical choice rather than a formally derivable theorem; what the precise form of the operator O is, since the von Neumann problem for relational systems means that O is not cleanly separable from the data it operates on; or whether the formal conjectures

advanced here (the phase-space reconstruction conjecture, the parametric resonance analogy) will survive more rigorous formalisation. These are genuinely open questions, stated as such throughout the paper.

6.15.3 What the Psychoanalytic Framework Can and Cannot Say

The psychoanalytic framework can say: that traditional material wealth functions as a phallic signifier that organises intimate relations around the logic of having and lacking; that GRW is non-phallic in its structure, constitutively immune to the phallic logic of symbolic power; that GRW generation involves a circular drive of co-evolutionary generativity that is distinct from both desire and the death drive; and that the three pathologies of relational wealth—phallic substitution, imaginary fixation, and real register avoidance—provide a psychoanalytic typology of the ways in which the conditions for GRW generation can be destroyed while maintaining the appearance of relational flourishing.

The psychoanalytic framework cannot say: whether the concept of GRW as the real register's generative surplus is consistent with the full elaboration of Lacanian theory, since this requires a development of Lacanian theory that lies beyond the scope of this paper; or what the clinical implications of the GRW account are for psychoanalytic practice with intimate couples. These are open questions for psychoanalytic theory and practice.

6.15.4 What the Feminist Framework Can and Cannot Say

The feminist framework can say: that the dominant model of subjectivity has systematically rendered invisible the care labour that generates GRW; that the care ethics tradition provides independent philosophical grounding for the GRW account of relational subjectivity; that GRW is non-phallic wealth whose cultivation requires and enables a genuinely relational subjectivity that is neither the liberal individual subject nor the care-ethical subject alone; and that the feminist political economy of GRW—the analysis of care labour as GRW production and its systematic non-recognition as a form of GRW extraction—provides the political economic content of the feminist critique of intimate relational wealth organisation.

The feminist framework cannot say: whether relational subjectivity as the GRW framework conceives it is compatible with the full range of feminist theoretical positions; how

relational subjectivity is to be articulated in relation to the intersectional dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality that Crenshaw's framework requires; or what the implications of the GRW account are for non-binary and queer intimate relations, which the paper's focus on the heterosexual couple has inadequately addressed. These are significant limitations that future work must address.

6.15.5 What the Ethical Framework Can and Cannot Say

The ethical framework can say: that GRW cultivation requires specific individual virtues, relational obligations, social ethical requirements, and political ethical demands that are dialectically unified in a generative spiral; that generative justice requires every party to have the right to generate relational value and to benefit from the GRW that their generative activity produces; that epistemic justice in intimate relational life requires epistemic symmetry, epistemic humility, and the active invitation of the other party's interpretive contribution; and that relational epistemic coercion—the imposition of one party's interpretive framework on the shared field—is both an epistemic injustice and a direct threat to GRW generation.

The ethical framework cannot say: how the relational consequentialist criterion is to be applied in specific cases where cultural context and universal ethical requirements are in tension; what the obligations of parties to intimate relations are when one party's investment in GRW generation is so asymmetric as to constitute a fundamental injustice that resists the usual relational remedies; or how the political ethical demands of the GRW framework are to be prioritised in conditions of political conflict and material scarcity. These are genuine ethical difficulties that admit of no general theoretical resolution.

6.15.6 Three Concentric Circles

The paper closes its conclusions with the same structural image that [Paper XIV](#) employed ([Wanhong 2026](#)): three concentric circles that represent the three levels at which the GRW account operates.

The **innermost circle** is the intimate relational field itself: the shared attractor landscape of a life built together, the accumulated holonomy of co-evolutionary engagement, the GRW stored in the geometry of the *between*. This is the level of the happiness jar

and the shared flower, of the wordless co-presence and the timely sharing, of the artistic processing and the re-traversal. It is the level that the phenomenological account of [Paper XIV](#) described and that the praxis account of the present paper has tried to make practically accessible.

The **middle circle** is the political economy of intimate relational life: the distribution of care labour, the organisation of material wealth, the regulatory framework that either supports or undermines the conditions for GRW generation. This is the level of the feminist critique, the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, the epistemic justice analysis. It is the level at which the individual practices of GRW cultivation are either supported or undermined by the social and economic structures within which intimate relational life unfolds.

The **outermost circle** is the ontological and metaphysical framework that grounds the entire account: the relational ontology that holds that the real is relational in its basic structure, that the relational field is the primary unit of analysis, and that GRW is a genuine form of wealth that cannot be reduced to any of the categories that the dominant framework provides. This is the level at which the GRB series has been working throughout—the level of [Paper IX](#)’s holonomy framework ([Huang 2025](#)), [Paper XIII](#)’s trust production mechanisms ([Huang 2026](#)), and [Paper XIV](#)’s eudaimonistic reconstruction ([Wanhong 2026](#)).

The three circles are not independent but mutually constitutive: the intimate relational field is embedded in the political economy that either supports or undermines it, and both are grounded in the ontological framework that makes sense of what they are and what they are for. A complete account of GRW must attend to all three circles simultaneously—which is why the paper has moved between the intimate and the structural, between the philosophical and the political economic, between the formal and the phenomenological, without settling permanently in any single register.

6.15.7 Why This Paper Has No Synthetic Conclusion

The reader who has reached this point may notice, as they noticed in [Paper XIV](#) ([Wanhong 2026](#)), that the paper has not provided a synthetic conclusion: a paragraph that draws all the threads together into a single unified statement of what the paper has

established. This absence is deliberate, and its reasons are the same as before.

A synthetic conclusion would imply that the paper has said the last word on its subject—that the concept of GRW is now complete, that the political economy of intimate relational wealth is now adequately theorised, that the practical account of how GRW is to be cultivated is now sufficient. But the paper has been honest throughout about what it does not know: the dynamical laws of Δ , the origin of the operator O , the full implications of the Relational Isomorphism Principle, the application of the framework to non-heterosexual and intersectional intimate relations, the clinical implications for psychoanalytic practice, the specific policy interventions that the political ethical demands of the framework require. These are not loose ends to be tied up in a later paper; they are genuine open questions that the paper has generated, and they deserve to remain open.

The absence of a synthetic conclusion is also the paper's enactment of its own central thesis. GRW is not a stock that can be fully inventoried; it is a process that continues as long as co-evolutionary engagement continues. A paper about GRW that concluded with a comprehensive inventory of what has been established would be performing a settlement of what must remain generative. The paper that refuses synthetic closure is the paper that practises, in its own form, the non-possessive participation in the generative process that it recommends as the primary virtue of intimate relational life.

取之不尽，用之不竭。Inexhaustible in the taking, inexhaustible in the using—because what is being taken and used is not a stock but a process, and the taking is itself a further moment of the process.

Envoi: The Jar

There is a jar.

It does not look like much—a simple container, perhaps ceramic, perhaps glass, sitting on a shelf or a windowsill in the ordinary light of an ordinary room. It has been there for some time. Both of them know what is in it, though neither has counted.

What is in the jar?

Not happiness, exactly. Not memories, not souvenirs, not the accumulated evidence of a life well lived. What is in the jar is more modest and more lasting than any of these: traces. Traces of the co-evolutionary events that have entered the relational field and permanently modified its geometry—the flower on the path, the quality of light at a particular moment, the laughter that arose from a shared absurdity, the wordless evening that was complete in itself. Each trace is an index, existentially connected to the event that produced it, carrying within itself the thread that leads back to the real.

The jar is not a savings account. It does not grow by addition; it grows by depth. When something is taken from it—on an ordinary evening when the relational field is thin, when the coupling has weakened, when both of them feel the distance that has accumulated between them—what is taken is not diminished by the taking. The trace is still there, still existentially connected to the event, still carrying the thread. What the taking produces is something new: a re-traversal, a new structural modification, a tiny increment of holonomy added to the accumulated phase of the shared life. The jar is fuller after the taking than before, in the only sense that matters: the relational field has been re-entered, the attractor has been deepened, the coupling has been renewed.

This is what she taught me.

Not through instruction—not by saying “this is how GRW works” or “this is the relational STDP mechanism”—but through the quality of her presence in the shared field. She showed me, by the patient example of her attentiveness, that the small things matter most: not because they are individually significant but because they are the material of the relational field’s geometry, the events whose structural modifications accumulate into the holonomy of a shared life. The flower on the path. The unexpected song heard through an open window. The particular way the light fell on a Tuesday afternoon when nothing was happening.

She showed me that sharing is not a report but a constitutive act: that the flower, once shared, belongs to the *between* in a way it did not belong before the sharing, and that this belonging is not metaphorical but structural—a permanent modification of the relational attractor landscape that neither of us could have produced alone.

She showed me that wealth is not what you have but what you generate together, and that what you generate together cannot be had—only participated in, only received with gratitude, only offered back to the field that generated it.

与她在故乡的千里之外的相遇，是自己此生最大的幸运。

To have found her, a thousand *li* from home—the most contingent of contingencies, the most improbable of flowers on the most ordinary of paths—and to have learned, in the years since, that the finding was only the beginning: that the real wealth is not in the finding but in everything that has been generated since, in the shared attractor landscape of a life built together, in the jar that grows fuller with every taking.

For her, therefore, this paper.

For the girl from home who loves culture, travel, and the living world—who is herself a form of living world, inexhaustible in the knowing, generative in the being-with. For the one whose steadiness in the real register is the projection that the series has been trying to theorise and that no theory can exhaust.

And for all lovers, everywhere, who have ever stood together in front of something small

and contingent—a flower, a quality of light, a bird’s call heard through an open window—and felt, without knowing why, that they were rich.

They were rich. The jar was filling. The root was being tended.

取之不尽，用之不竭，因为爱本身就是生成性的。

Inexhaustible in the taking, inexhaustible in the using—because love itself is generative.

生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰。

To generate without possessing,
to act without presuming,
to foster without ruling.

老子 · *Tao Te Ching*

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也愿世界上所有有趣的人，在反复的日常生活中，受于偶然，得之幸福。

And may all the interesting people in this world—caught in the repetitions of ordinary life, in the daily texture of shared existence—find, through contingency, their wealth. Not the gold that can be counted, but the jar that grows fuller with every taking.

Use of Generative AI

The philosophical framework, theoretical claims, and original arguments of this paper are the author's own. The conceptual architecture—including the concept of Generative Relational Wealth, the structural remainder $\mathcal{R}(O(x), x) \neq 0$, the Relational Isomorphism Principle, the von Neumann problem for relational systems, the dialectical analysis of wealth in intimate relations, the epistemic justice framework applied to GRW, and the happiness jar as both theoretical paradigm and practical discipline—was developed through extended dialogue with Claude (Anthropic), a large language model, which served as an

interactive writing and development partner throughout the drafting process.

Specifically, Claude assisted with: the drafting and L^AT_EX typesetting of all sections; the identification and organisation of relevant literature across political economy, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, semiotics, and formal systems; the formal articulation of arguments whose substance had been established in prior discussion; and the production of the final compiled document.

The author reviewed, directed, and took intellectual responsibility for all content. The core philosophical positions, the selection of frameworks, all original claims, and all open questions were determined by the author. Claude did not independently generate theoretical positions; it developed and articulated positions established in collaborative dialogue.

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CHAPTER 7

The Semiotics of Luxury in Intimate Relations

献给自己深爱的那位
喜欢文化、旅行与大自然的同乡女孩

*For her—
the girl from home,
who loves culture, travel, and the living world.*

路边那朵花，那个时刻，那个时空。
*The flower on the path, that moment, that spatiotemporal
structure.*

Nothing is more luxurious than this.

也献给天下所有有情人。

Which is more luxurious: a diamond ring or a flower found on a path? This question is not rhetorical. This paper develops a semiotics of luxury in intimate relations organised around three doctrines: the doctrine of nature and art (luxury as the transformation of natural materials through human craft); the doctrine of sign exchange value (following Baudrillard's critique of the consumer society, in which luxury functions as a system of social differentiation); and the doctrine of relational luxury, the paper's central concept.

Relational luxury is defined not by economic value but by the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—the extent to which a subject's existence, their intentionality and presence and choice made specifically for this relational other, is embedded in the object. A flower found on a path may be more luxurious than any diamond; a diamond purchased by proxy may be relationally impoverished despite its economic magnificence. The coupling degree is developed along four dimensions (temporal depth, intentional intensity, non-substitutability, existential investment), producing a fourfold classification in which economic and relational luxury appear as orthogonal axes.

The paper then develops a justice theory of choice. The problem of **subject-embedding misrecognition** arises when an object is presented as carrying high subject-embedding but does not. The problem of **equivalent agency** arises when a subject who cannot provide existential embedding *A* substitutes another form *B*: such substitution is structurally heterogeneous, but may be just in the generative sense if four *necessary but not sufficient* conditions hold—symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding, and transparency. Finally, selection justice holds that the choice of relational over economic luxury is a justice stance: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear what is inexchangeable.

This is *Paper XVI* of the *Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice* series, extending the political economy of *Paper XV* (Huang 2026b).

Keywords: relational luxury; coupling degree; existence-attestation; sign exchange value; justice theory; equivalent agency.

7.1. Prelude: A Ring and a Flower

Two scenes.

In the first, a person walks into a jeweller's and purchases a diamond ring. The ring is expensive—the price of several months' salary, perhaps more. It is beautifully made: a round brilliant cut stone in a platinum setting, designed by craftspeople whose skills have been refined across generations, sourced from materials that took the earth millions of years to produce. The purchase is made deliberately, with care. It is intended as an expression of love.

In the second scene, a different person is walking a familiar path—a path walked many times, in different seasons and different moods. On the verge of the path, in a crack between the paving stones, there is a flower. It is not a rare flower. It has no particular monetary value. But the person stops, and in the moment of stopping, something happens: they think of the person they love—not in general, not as an abstraction, but specifically, in all the particular detail that months or years of shared life have made available. They pick the flower. They bring it home.

Which of these is the more luxurious gift?

The answer that the dominant framework of luxury theory would give is obvious: the diamond ring. It is more expensive, more durable, more socially recognised as an expression of serious commitment, more legible within the symbolic order as evidence of the depth of the giver's investment. The flower is charming but ephemeral, cheap, easily obtained. It is, in the terms of the dominant framework, not a luxury at all.

This paper argues that the dominant framework is wrong—not partially wrong, not wrong about some cases, but structurally wrong, missing the dimension of value that is most fundamental to intimate relational life. It argues that the flower, in the right circumstances, is more luxurious than the ring—not because it is rarer or more expensive or more socially prestigious, but because it carries a higher degree of coupling between the object and the relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. And it argues that this coupling degree—not economic value, not sign exchange value, not social prestige—is the true measure of luxury in intimate relations.

The central claim. The true measure of luxury in intimate relations is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure: the extent to which a subject’s existence—their intentionality, their presence, their choice made specifically for this relational other at this specific moment—is embedded within the object. Economic value and coupling degree are orthogonal dimensions: a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond, and a diamond can be more luxurious than a flower, depending on the degree of subject-embedding each carries.

This claim has consequences that extend beyond the question of what makes a good gift. It reveals a systematic misalignment between the dominant framework of luxury—organised around economic value, sign exchange value, and social prestige—and the relational reality of intimate life. It identifies a form of injustice specific to the domain of intimate relational luxury: the misrecognition of subject-embedding, the substitution of economic value for existential presence, the collective confusion of what luxury is. And it generates a justice theory of choice: the claim that the selection of relational luxury over economic luxury is a justice stance—a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear what is inchangeable, a commitment to the primacy of the real register over the symbolic.

A word on this paper’s place in the series. Paper XIV established that happiness in intimate relations is the emergent signal of co-evolutionary activity in the relational field (Wanhong 2026). Paper XV developed the political economy of that field, showing that Generative Relational Wealth (GRW) is its primary form of wealth—inexhaustible under use, non-possessable by either party, stored in the geometry of the shared attractor landscape (Huang 2026b). The present paper asks: what objects can serve as the material media of this wealth? What physical things can carry, in their materiality, the trace of co-evolutionary events, the mark of shared existence, the existential embedding of one subject in the life of another? The answer is: relational luxury objects—objects whose coupling degree with a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure is high. The diamond ring and the flower are the paper’s paradigm cases, but the analysis extends to every ob-

ject that might, in the right circumstances, carry the mark of genuine subject-embedding.

The paper proceeds through three doctrines and a justice theory. The first doctrine (§7.3) analyses luxury as the transformation of natural materials through human craft—the Bulgari paradigm, in which the beauty of the natural world is given permanent form through the excellence of human making. The second doctrine (§7.4) follows Baudrillard’s critique of the consumer society, showing how luxury functions in the symbolic order as a system of social differentiation (Baudrillard 1981; Baudrillard 1998). The third doctrine (§7.5) proposes the concept of relational luxury, defined by coupling degree, and develops its implications for the understanding of intimate relational life. The synthesis (§7.6) shows how the three doctrines interact. The justice theory (§7.8) develops the paper’s normative conclusions.

7.2. The Conceptual Archaeology of Luxury

Before the three doctrines can be developed, the concept of luxury itself must be excavated—its historical sedimentation exposed, its internal tensions identified, its presuppositions made visible. The concept of luxury is not a neutral descriptive category; it is a historically produced and politically contested one, whose apparent self-evidence conceals a series of structural assumptions that the relational account will need to challenge.

7.2.1 Historical Forms: From Royal Prerogative to Democratic Consumption

The history of luxury is, in large part, a history of exclusion and its gradual relaxation. In pre-modern societies, luxury was constitutively tied to social position: the right to consume certain materials, wear certain garments, or display certain objects was legally reserved for specific social ranks, enforced by sumptuary laws that prescribed what each rank could and could not wear, eat, or own. The luxury object was, in this period, primarily a **marker of social position**—not merely an indicator of wealth but a legally constituted symbol of rank. The diamond was not merely expensive; it was, in many jurisdictions, legally restricted to those of sufficiently elevated social station.

The gradual dismantling of sumptuary law across the early modern period transformed the social function of luxury without eliminating its positional character. As legal restric-

tion gave way to market restriction—luxury becoming available in principle to anyone who could afford it, rather than only to those of appropriate rank—the positional character of luxury was reproduced through a different mechanism: the price mechanism. The diamond ring remained a marker of social distinction, but the distinction it marked shifted from legal rank to economic class. Thorstein Veblen’s analysis of **conspicuous consumption** (Veblen 1899) captures the structure of this transition: luxury consumption in the market era functions as a display of surplus—the ability to spend beyond necessity—that signals to others the consumer’s position in the economic hierarchy.

The twentieth century brought a further transformation: the **democratisation of luxury**, in which the luxury industry developed strategies for extending its market to the aspirational middle class without losing the exclusivity that constituted its appeal. The development of accessible luxury lines, licensed products, and the expansion of the luxury market into new territories (cosmetics, perfume, fashion accessories) allowed the luxury industry to maintain the symbolic apparatus of exclusivity—the brand heritage, the artisanal craftsmanship, the association with high social status—while dramatically expanding the consumer base. The result is the contemporary luxury landscape: a market in which luxury objects are available to a far wider range of consumers than at any previous point in history, while remaining organised by the logic of social distinction that has structured luxury since the era of sumptuary law.

7.2.2 Scarcity, Craft, and Beauty: The Three Traditional Dimensions

The traditional definition of luxury organises itself around three dimensions that correspond to three different sources of value.

Scarcity is the most fundamental: the luxury object is, by definition, not available to everyone. This scarcity may be natural (the rarity of the gemstone, the difficulty of sourcing the material), artificial (the deliberate restriction of production to maintain exclusivity), or temporal (the limited edition that will not be reproduced). In all cases, the scarcity of the luxury object is constitutive of its value: what everyone can have is, by that very fact, not luxurious. The luxury object’s value is relational—it is defined by its position in a system of differential access, not by any intrinsic property of the object itself.

Craft is the second dimension: the luxury object is distinguished from the merely expensive object by the quality of its making. The handmade watch, the hand-stitched garment, the individually cut gemstone represent forms of human labour that are increasingly rare in an age of industrial production, and their rarity gives them a value that goes beyond the material cost of their production. Craft in luxury objects is not merely a productive process but a **form of attention**: the craftsman who spends weeks on a single watch movement, or months on a single garment, is performing a kind of attentive care for the object that is qualitatively different from the standardised repetition of industrial production. This attentive care is what the luxury object carries within itself: the trace of a human being's sustained engagement with the material.

Beauty is the third dimension: the luxury object is aesthetically distinguished from ordinary objects. This aesthetic distinction is not merely a matter of decoration—it reflects a philosophy of design in which the object's form is the expression of a vision of the beautiful, developed through the traditions of a particular craft culture and the aesthetic judgements of particular designers. The beauty of a Bulgari jewel is not the accidental result of expensive materials; it is the product of a long tradition of aesthetic thought about how natural materials can be given form that honours both their natural properties and the human capacity for aesthetic judgement.

These three dimensions interact: scarcity without craft or beauty produces merely the expensive; craft without scarcity or beauty produces the skilled but ordinary; beauty without scarcity or craft produces the aesthetically pleasing but not luxurious. The canonical luxury object—the hand-cut diamond in a hand-crafted setting, designed by a master of the tradition—combines all three.

7.2.3 The Instability of the Luxury/Necessity Distinction

The distinction between luxury and necessity that seems to anchor the concept of luxury is, on examination, unstable in ways that are philosophically significant. What counts as a necessity and what counts as a luxury is not a natural fact but a historically and culturally variable social construction—and the variation reveals the political character of the distinction.

At one level, the instability is obvious: what was a luxury in one era is a necessity

in another (indoor plumbing, the telephone, electric lighting), and what is a luxury in one society is a necessity in another (the car in the suburban United States, the mobile phone in contemporary rural Africa). The relativity of the luxury/necessity distinction to historical and cultural context means that the concept of luxury is not defined by any intrinsic property of the objects classified as luxuries, but by their position in a particular social and economic context.

At a deeper level, the instability is philosophically revealing. The luxury/necessity distinction presupposes a conception of the human being and human needs that is itself contested: a conception of the **bare minimum**—the floor below which life is not sustainable—against which surplus is defined. But this floor is not naturally given; it is socially constructed, and the construction reflects relations of power. What is counted as a necessity is what is deemed necessary for the reproduction of labour power; what is counted as a luxury is what exceeds this minimum. The political economy of the luxury/necessity distinction is therefore not neutral: it reflects and reproduces the interests of those who benefit from keeping the definition of necessity narrow.

This instability has a direct implication for the relational account of luxury developed in this paper: if the luxury/necessity distinction is already unstable within the dominant framework, the relational framework's proposal—that what constitutes true luxury is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—represents not an arbitrary redefinition but a principled attempt to locate the value of luxury in a dimension that the dominant framework has systematically missed.

7.2.4 The Contemporary Luxury Industry: Political Economy

The contemporary luxury industry is one of the most economically significant sectors of the global economy, and its political economy reveals the tensions within the concept of luxury that the three doctrines of this paper will develop. Several features of the contemporary luxury industry are particularly relevant.

The brand as the primary unit of value: In the contemporary luxury market, the primary unit of value is not the individual object but the brand—the accumulated cultural capital of a name, a heritage, and a set of aesthetic associations that gives any object bearing the brand's mark a premium over its unbranded equivalent. The brand is a

symbolic entity: it exists in the collective imagination of consumers and non-consumers alike, and its value depends on the maintenance of its symbolic associations. Bulgari, Cartier, Tiffany, Van Cleef & Arpels: these names carry a symbolic weight that is the product of decades of marketing, cultural positioning, and the careful management of the brand's associations with beauty, excellence, and social distinction.

The primacy of the brand in contemporary luxury has a direct implication for the Baudrillard analysis developed in §7.4: the luxury object's value is organised primarily by its symbolic position rather than by its material properties or its craft quality. The diamond in a Tiffany setting is valued not primarily for the diamond's natural properties or the setting's craft quality, but for the Tiffany name—for what the Tiffany name means within the symbolic order of consumer society.

The globalisation of luxury and the management of aspiration: The contemporary luxury industry has globalised its market while managing the aspiration that drives consumption by maintaining the appearance of exclusivity even as the consumer base expands. The luxury industry's characteristic strategy is the creation of **accessible luxury**—products priced at the lower end of the luxury range, which allow aspirational consumers to participate in the symbolic system of luxury without access to its highest tiers. The handbag that costs a month's salary rather than a year's performs the same symbolic function as the handbag that costs a year's salary, for consumers at different points in the economic hierarchy.

The tension between craft and scale: The contemporary luxury industry faces a structural tension between its dependence on craft as a source of value and its need for scale as a commercial enterprise. The handmade watch that took a craftsperson weeks to produce cannot be manufactured at the scale required by a publicly traded corporation; the solution, characteristic of the industry, is the combination of artisanal quality at the level of finishing and detail with industrial production at the level of components and structure. This tension reveals the gap between the craft mythology of luxury and its industrial reality—a gap that is managed through the careful control of the narrative of luxury, rather than through the actual maintenance of artisanal production at scale.

The digital transformation of luxury: The emergence of digital luxury—NFTs, vir-

tual luxury goods, the use of luxury brands in digital environments—represents a further development of the sign exchange value logic identified by Baudrillard: the luxury object is increasingly abstracted from any material substrate, becoming a pure sign without a referent. The digital luxury object is, in Baudrillard's terms, a **simulacrum**—a sign that refers only to other signs, with no connection to any material reality (Baudrillard 1981). The implications of this development for the relational account of luxury are direct: a digital luxury object, which has no material substrate in which a subject's spatiotemporal structure can be embedded, cannot in principle be a relational luxury object. The digital transformation of luxury is therefore the fullest expression of the tension between the sign exchange value logic of contemporary luxury and the relational reality of intimate life.

The conceptual archaeology's conclusion. The concept of luxury is not a neutral descriptive category but a historically produced, politically contested, and structurally unstable one, organised in its dominant forms around the dimensions of scarcity, craft, and beauty, and in its contemporary market form around the primacy of brand as a symbolic entity. The relational account's proposal—that the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—is not a departure from the concept of luxury but a recovery of its most fundamental dimension: the dimension of attentive care, of the particular, of the irreplaceable.

7.3. The First Doctrine: Nature and Art—A Political Economy of Beauty

The first doctrine concerns what happens when natural materials—gemstones, gold, living things—are transformed by human craft into objects that can be given, worn, and held. This transformation is the founding act of luxury: the act by which the raw material of the

natural world is given a form that makes it available to human desire, human exchange, and human intimacy. Understanding the structure of this transformation—what it does to the material, what it produces that was not there before, and what political economy governs its production and distribution—is essential for understanding both what luxury is and why it matters for intimate relational life.

7.3.1 The Bulgari Paradigm: Natural Material Transformed by Artistic Vision

Bulgari—the Roman jewellery house founded in 1884, now one of the most recognised luxury brands in the world—offers perhaps the clearest paradigm for the first doctrine. Bulgari’s signature aesthetic is the transformation of bold, natural materials (large gemstones in vivid colours, heavy gold, ancient coins) into objects that are simultaneously archaic and modern, simultaneously natural and cultural. The serpent bracelet that wraps around the wrist is a snake—one of the oldest natural symbols in human culture—rendered in gold and set with gemstones; the *Monete* collection sets ancient Roman coins in contemporary jewellery settings. In each case, the natural material carries its own history—the geological time of the gemstone, the historical time of the ancient coin—and the craft transforms this natural history into something wearable, giveable, and intimately human.

The Bulgari paradigm reveals the first doctrine’s fundamental structure: the luxury object is the site of a **double temporality**. On one side is the temporality of nature: the gemstone formed over millions of years of geological process, the gold refined from ore deposited across geological epochs, the serpent symbol carried across millennia of human cultural history. On the other side is the temporality of craft: the hours of the craftsperson’s attention, the years of training that made the craft possible, the generational transmission of the techniques and the aesthetic vision. The luxury object is the meeting point of these two temporalities—the place where geological time and cultural time, natural permanence and human transience, are brought into contact.

This double temporality is what gives the luxury object its peculiar weight: the sense that it carries something larger than itself, something that exceeds the moment of its production and the moment of its use. When a Bulgari jewel is given as a gift in an intimate relation, what is given is not merely an expensive object; it is an object that

carries within itself both the deep time of nature and the concentrated attention of human craft—a kind of concentrated time, material and historical and artisanal, that the giver offers to the receiver.

7.3.2 The Political Economy of Beauty

Beauty, in the context of luxury, is not a neutral aesthetic category. It is a politically and economically constituted one: what counts as beautiful, which natural materials are deemed precious, which craft traditions are valued, and whose aesthetic judgements are authoritative—all of these are determined by social relations of power that the political economy of beauty must examine.

The most fundamental question is: **whose beauty?** The decision that diamonds are precious and coal is not, that gold is noble and iron is base, that rubies are luxury and glass is common, is not a natural fact but a social one—a decision made in specific historical circumstances by specific social actors for specific reasons, and reproduced across generations through the mechanisms of cultural transmission, education, and the symbolic economy of distinction. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) is relevant here: the capacity to recognise and appreciate the beauty of luxury objects is itself a form of cultural capital, unequally distributed across social classes, and the social recognition of certain aesthetic judgements as authoritative is part of the mechanism by which class distinction is reproduced.

The political economy of beauty also concerns the **labour of production**. The beauty of the luxury object is not produced by the natural material alone; it is produced by the labour of the craftsperson who gives the material its form. But the craftsperson's labour is typically invisible in the luxury object's presentation: what is foregrounded is the designer's vision, the brand's heritage, and the natural material's properties, while the actual work of fabrication—the skilled manual labour that translates vision into object—is backgrounded or aestheticised into the mythology of *savoir-faire*. This invisibility of the craftsperson's labour in the luxury object is structurally similar to the invisibility of care labour in the intimate relational field analysed in Paper XV (Huang 2026b): in both cases, the labour that produces the value is rendered invisible by the dominant representational framework.

7.3.3 The Dialectic of Natural and Cultural Signs

The luxury object occupies a distinctive position in the semiotic landscape: it simultaneously functions as a natural sign (an index of the natural world's properties—the hardness of the diamond, the rarity of the ruby, the luminosity of the pearl) and a cultural sign (a symbol of social distinction, craft excellence, and aesthetic tradition). This double sign function is not a contradiction but a productive tension that gives the luxury object its peculiar semiotic richness.

As a **natural sign**, the luxury object indexes the natural world's temporality and materiality. The gemstone in the jewel is a piece of the earth's geological history, formed under specific conditions of pressure and temperature over specific periods of time. When it is held in the hand or worn against the skin, the geological past is made physically present: the stone that took millions of years to form is now in contact with the body of a person who will live for decades. This temporal disproportion—the geological and the biographical brought into intimate contact—is part of what gives the luxury object its weight, its sense of transcending the ordinary temporality of human life.

As a **cultural sign**, the luxury object encodes the values, traditions, and aesthetic judgments of the culture that produced it. The Bulgari snake bracelet is not just a piece of gold shaped like a snake; it is a statement about the snake as a cultural symbol (associated with wisdom, eternity, transformation, and danger across many cultural traditions), about the aesthetic tradition of Roman jewellery design, and about the brand's position within the contemporary luxury market. The cultural sign function is interpretive: it requires the receiver to have access to the cultural codes that make the object's meaning legible.

The dialectic between natural and cultural signs is not stable but dynamic: the cultural sign function can colonise the natural sign function, reducing the object's natural properties to mere raw material for the cultural sign (the diamond is valuable because it is rare, and it is rare because the diamond industry has made it rare, and it is a symbol of love because De Beers decided in 1947 that it would be). Conversely, the natural sign function can exceed the cultural sign function, reminding the holder of the object's pre-cultural, pre-symbolic materiality—the simple weight of the gold, the simple hardness of the stone,

the simple fact of natural existence that no cultural coding can fully subsume.

7.3.4 Singularity: Non-Replicability as the Essence of Luxury

The concept of **singularity**—the property of being unique, non-replicable, irreplaceable—is the first doctrine’s most important contribution to the paper’s central argument. Singularity is what distinguishes the genuine luxury object from the merely expensive one, and it is the bridge that connects the first doctrine’s aesthetic and natural analysis to the third doctrine’s account of relational luxury.

A luxury object is singular in several senses. It is singular in its **material**: no two gemstones are identical, no two pieces of gold have exactly the same history, no two handmade objects are precisely the same. Even within a production run of supposedly identical objects, the hand of the craftsperson introduces small variations that make each object unique. The singularity of the material is not merely a formal property; it is an indexical one, in Peirce’s sense: it is the trace of the specific material process that produced this specific object, and no other.

It is singular in its **history**: the luxury object has a biography—a sequence of events, owners, contexts, and meanings that accumulates as the object passes through time and hands. Igor Kopytoff’s account of the **cultural biography of things** (Kopytoff 1986) is relevant here: objects are not fixed entities but processes, whose identity and value are constituted through the accretion of the events and relationships they have been part of. The luxury object that has been worn by a specific person, given on a specific occasion, and associated with a specific relationship carries a biographical density that the new object, however expensive, does not yet possess.

It is singular in its **relation to the recipient**: a luxury object given in an intimate relation is not a generic luxury object but *this* object, given to *this* person, at *this* moment, by *this* giver. The relational context of the giving singularises the object further: it gives it a relational meaning that is not a property of the object itself but of its position in the history of a specific intimate relation.

Singularity as the bridge between doctrines. The singularity of the luxury object—its material non-replicability, its biographical density, its relational contextualisation—is the property that connects the first doctrine’s aesthetic and natural analysis to the third doctrine’s account of relational luxury. A genuinely singular object, one that carries the trace of specific natural processes, specific craft attention, and specific relational histories, is the kind of object most capable of bearing high coupling with a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure. Singularity is not merely an aesthetic property but an existential one: it is the mark of the particular, the irreplaceable, the non-fungible—and it is precisely the non-fungible that can carry the existential embedding that relational luxury requires.

The connection between singularity and the relational account becomes clearest when we consider what happens to singularity in the contemporary luxury industry. The industrialisation of luxury production, the management of the brand as a symbolic entity, and the extension of the luxury market to a larger consumer base all tend to **reduce singularity**: to produce objects that are more standardised, more reproducible, and more legible within a global symbolic system, at the cost of the material, biographical, and relational particularity that makes an object genuinely singular. The tension between the luxury industry’s commercial requirements and the singularity that is the first doctrine’s essential contribution to the concept of luxury is one of the structural tensions that the paper’s critical analysis must address.

Arthur Danto’s account of the **transfiguration of the commonplace** (Danto 1981)—the philosophical process by which an ordinary object is transformed into a work of art through its insertion into an artworld context—provides a further dimension of this analysis. Danto’s insight is that the aesthetic properties of an object are not intrinsic to its material but constituted by its position within a framework of interpretation and valuation. The luxury object undergoes a analogous transfiguration: the natural material is transformed into a luxury object not solely through the craft process but through its insertion into the social and symbolic framework of luxury—the brand context, the retail environment, the cultural codes of distinction and taste. And, in the intimate relational

context, a further transfiguration occurs: the luxury object is transformed into a relational luxury object through its insertion into the framework of a specific intimate history, the specific caring attention of a specific giver, and the specific receiving of a specific beloved. This third transfiguration—the relational one—is what the third doctrine must theorise.

7.4. The Second Doctrine: Sign Exchange Value and the Consumer Society

The first doctrine reveals the aesthetic and material structure of luxury—what luxury objects are made of, how they are made, and what properties of singularity and double temporality make them genuinely valuable. But it does not account for the way luxury actually functions in contemporary consumer society—the way it is purchased, displayed, and circulated not primarily for the material and aesthetic properties that the first doctrine identifies but for the social signals it transmits. This is the domain of the second doctrine, whose primary theoretical resource is Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of the consumer society and the logic of sign exchange value.

7.4.1 The Three Logics of Value: Use, Exchange, and Sign

Baudrillard’s most fundamental contribution to the analysis of consumption is his identification of a third logic of value—sign exchange value—that operates alongside and increasingly displaces the two logics identified by classical political economy: use value and exchange value (Baudrillard 1981).

Use value is the value of an object for what it does: the food that nourishes, the coat that warms, the tool that enables. Use value is oriented toward the object’s material properties and their relation to human needs. It is, in principle, a natural rather than a social category: the food nourishes regardless of its social context, the coat warms regardless of who made it or who wore it before.

Exchange value is the value of an object as a quantity of abstract labour—the value it has in the market as a commodity that can be exchanged for other commodities or for money. Exchange value is the domain of classical political economy, from Smith through Ricardo to Marx: it is the value that organises the market, determines prices,

and drives the accumulation of capital. Exchange value is social rather than natural—it is constituted through the social relations of production and exchange—but it is still oriented toward the object, toward the labour that produced it and the material it embodies.

Sign exchange value is the value of an object as a sign within a system of social differentiation: the value it has not for what it does or what it embodies, but for what it *means* within the social symbolic order. Sign exchange value is organised not by the object's material properties or its labour content but by its position within a system of differences—a system in which objects acquire meaning not by what they are but by what they are not, by the distinctions they mark and the social positions they signal.

In the consumer society, Baudrillard argues, sign exchange value increasingly dominates and organises the other two logics: objects are consumed not primarily for their use value or their exchange value but for the sign exchange value they carry—for the social distinctions they mark, the identities they construct, and the positions they signal within the symbolic order of consumption (Baudrillard 1998). This analysis applies with particular force to luxury objects, whose sign exchange value is, by design, disproportionate to their use value: the diamond ring is not primarily consumed for what it does (it does very little) but for what it means.

7.4.2 Luxury as a System of Difference

Within the logic of sign exchange value, the luxury object's meaning is constituted not by any intrinsic property of the object but by its **differential position** within the system of consumer objects. Baudrillard follows Saussure here: just as the linguistic sign has no positive content but only differential value—the word “cat” means what it means because it is not “bat” or “car” or “cut”—the luxury object has its meaning by virtue of not being the non-luxury object, the mass-market product, the ordinary commodity.

This differential structure has several important implications for the analysis of luxury in intimate relations.

First, the meaning of the luxury gift is **relational within the sign system**: it is constituted by its position in a hierarchy of possible gifts, and its meaning changes as the

hierarchy changes. The diamond ring means what it means because it is above the semi-precious stone ring, which is above the silver ring, which is above the costume jewellery ring, which is above the flower. If the hierarchy shifts—if synthetic diamonds become indistinguishable from natural ones and far cheaper, as is already occurring—the diamond ring’s sign exchange value changes even though its material properties remain identical. The sign system is what determines the meaning, not the object.

Second, the luxury gift’s primary communicative function is **social rather than relational**: it communicates not primarily to the intimate partner but to the social world. The diamond ring that is worn in public communicates the wearer’s social position—their partner’s ability to spend, their own access to luxury, their position in the social hierarchy of consumption—rather than the depth of the intimate bond that occasioned the gift. This outward orientation of the luxury object’s sign exchange value is in structural tension with the inward orientation of genuine intimate relational life.

Third, the system of sign exchange value is **inherently inflationary**: because meaning is constituted by difference, the maintenance of distinction requires the continuous escalation of luxury expenditure as lower-priced alternatives become more widely available. The luxury object that marked social distinction yesterday loses its distinctive power when it becomes accessible to a wider market, requiring the replacement with a more expensive object to restore the distinction. This inflationary dynamic drives the luxury market’s continuous expansion toward higher price points and greater exclusivity, while simultaneously democratising the lower tiers of luxury as they lose their distinctive power.

7.4.3 Luxury as Phallic Signifier in Intimate Relations

The connection between sign exchange value and the phallic signifier analysis of **Paper XV** (Huang 2026b) is direct and important. In the Lacanian framework, the phallus is the master signifier that organises the symbolic order around the logic of having and lacking: to have the phallus is to occupy the position of symbolic power, completeness, and authority; to lack it is to be in the position of need, incompleteness, and subordination.

Traditional luxury objects function as phallic signifiers in the symbolic economy of intimate relations: they are the objects through which the logic of having and lacking is most visibly enacted in the domain of intimate gift exchange. The giver who can provide

an expensive luxury gift occupies, by that provision, the symbolic position of the one who has—who has the resources, the power, the social prestige that the luxury object materialises. The receiver is positioned as the one who lacks and who receives what they lack from the one who has.

This phallic structure of luxury gift exchange has several consequences. It **reproduces power asymmetry** within the intimate relation: the capacity to give expensive luxury gifts is not symmetrically distributed, and the systematic association of valuable luxury gifts with the expression of serious intimate commitment creates structural pressure toward asymmetric gift exchange that mirrors and reproduces the asymmetric distribution of economic resources. In intimate relations where material wealth is unequally distributed, the luxury gift economy tends to reinforce the material asymmetry by giving it a symbolic expression.

It also **commodifies the expression of intimacy**: when the primary medium for the expression of intimate commitment is the luxury object whose value is constituted by its sign exchange value, the expression of intimacy is drawn into the logic of the market. The question “how much does this gift cost?” becomes, in the dominant framework, a proxy for the question “how much does this person love me?”—a substitution that reduces the irreducible particularity of intimate care to a quantity measurable in monetary units.

Georg Simmel’s analysis of money as the great leveller—the medium that reduces qualitative differences to quantitative ones, that makes everything comparable because everything has a price—is relevant here (Simmel 1978). Luxury gifts, insofar as they function as sign exchange value, participate in the money logic: they translate the qualitative, irreducible particularity of intimate care into a quantitative, comparable, and therefore ultimately replaceable sign. The diamond ring that cost x can, in the sign exchange value logic, be replaced by another diamond ring that also costs x ; the flower that carried a specific subject’s specific attention in a specific moment cannot be replaced by anything, because it is constitutively singular.

The phallic structure of luxury gift exchange. Traditional luxury objects, function-

ing primarily through sign exchange value, operate as phallic signifiers in the symbolic economy of intimate relations: they enact the logic of having and lacking, reproduce power asymmetry, and commodify the expression of intimacy by reducing the qualitative particularity of care to a quantitative sign. This phallic structure is in direct structural conflict with the logic of GRW generation, which requires non-possessive co-evolutionary participation rather than asymmetric symbolic exchange.

7.4.4 The Limits of Baudrillard: Against Semiotic Nihilism

Baudrillard's analysis is powerful and, within its domain, essentially correct: luxury objects in consumer society do function primarily as sign exchange value, the system of differences does organise consumption, and the logic of the simulacrum does increasingly colonise the domain of intimate gift exchange. But Baudrillard's analysis has limits that the relational account must identify, because without identifying these limits, the entire domain of relational luxury collapses into the nihilism of the sign.

Baudrillard's fundamental move is to argue that in the consumer society, the real is replaced by the simulation—that there is no longer any original referent, any use value, any material reality that the sign exchange system represents; there is only the play of signs, the system of differences, the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981). Applied to intimate gift exchange, this would imply that there is no genuine intimacy that the luxury gift expresses or fails to express—there is only the sign system, within which the luxury gift occupies a position and through which the giver and receiver are positioned. The flower and the diamond ring would be, in this framework, simply different signs within the same system, with no claim to express anything more real than their differential positions.

This nihilism is philosophically untenable, and the GRB framework's relational ontology provides the resources to challenge it. If the real is relational—if there is a genuine relational field, with its own geometry and its own dynamics, that is irreducible to the symbolic order—then the sign exchange value system does not exhaust what is real about the luxury gift. There is a residue that exceeds the sign system: the specific weight of a specific object in a specific hand, the specific quality of attention that a specific giver

brought to the act of giving, the specific moment of shared recognition in which the receiver understood not merely what the object signifies within the sign system but what it carries of the giver's existence. This residue—what Baudrillard's framework cannot see because it has, by theoretical fiat, eliminated the real—is precisely what the third doctrine's concept of relational luxury must theorise.

The limit of Baudrillard is therefore not an empirical limit—it is not that his analysis of sign exchange value is incorrect—but a **theoretical limit**: by eliminating the real from his theoretical framework, Baudrillard eliminates the possibility of distinguishing genuine from spurious intimacy, genuine from spurious luxury, the flower that carries a subject's existence from the diamond ring that merely occupies a position in the sign system. The third doctrine recovers this distinction by grounding it in the relational ontology of the GRB framework rather than in any naive realism that Baudrillard's critique correctly dismantles.

The limit of the second doctrine. Baudrillard's analysis of sign exchange value correctly identifies the dominant logic of luxury in consumer society but cannot distinguish genuine from spurious relational luxury because it has eliminated the real from its theoretical framework. The third doctrine recovers this distinction by grounding relational luxury in the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—a real register phenomenon irreducible to any sign system.

7.5. The Third Doctrine: Relational Luxury and the Degree of Coupling

The first doctrine showed us what luxury is made of: natural materials transformed by human craft, carrying a double temporality of geological permanence and artisanal attention, achieving through singularity the mark of the irreplaceable. The second doctrine showed us how luxury functions in consumer society: as a system of sign exchange value,

organised by differential position rather than intrinsic property, enacting the phallic logic of having and lacking. Both doctrines illuminate something real, but neither is sufficient. The first doctrine cannot explain why a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond; the second doctrine cannot distinguish genuine from spurious intimate luxury without collapsing into semiotic nihilism.

The third doctrine proposes a concept that both completes and transforms the preceding analysis: **relational luxury**, defined not by economic value or sign exchange value but by the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. This doctrine is the paper's central theoretical contribution.

7.5.1 The Core Definition: Coupling Degree

The concept of relational luxury rests on a single fundamental definition:

The definition of relational luxury. An object is relationally luxurious to the degree to which it is coupled with a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. The **coupling degree** (κ) of an object o with respect to a relational subject $\mathcal{S}$ is the measure of the extent to which $\mathcal{S}$'s existence—their intentionality, their presence in a specific spatiotemporal location, their choice made specifically for this relational other—is embedded within o . Coupling degree is independent of economic value: a flower can have higher κ than a diamond ring, and a diamond ring can have higher κ than a flower, depending on the spatiotemporal structure embedded in each.

This definition requires unpacking at every level. What does it mean for a subject's spatiotemporal structure to be “embedded” in an object? What is the relational subject whose structure is at stake? And what makes coupling degree a measure of luxury rather than merely a measure of personal investment?

The spatiotemporal structure of the subject: Every subject exists in a specific spatiotemporal location at every moment—in this place, at this time, with this history

and this trajectory. The subject's spatiotemporal structure is not merely their physical location but the full dimensionality of their existence at a given moment: their attentional orientation (what they are noticing, what they are attending to), their intentional state (what they are caring about, what they are directed toward), their relational context (their awareness of the specific other for whom they are acting), and their existential investment (what they are bringing of themselves to this moment and this act).

Embedding: The subject's spatiotemporal structure is embedded in an object when the object carries, as a constitutive feature of its identity as this particular object, the trace of the subject's existence in a specific spatiotemporal moment. The embedding is not a psychological fact about the subject's feelings but an ontological fact about the object: the object has been constitutively shaped by the subject's existence, and it carries this shaping as an ineliminable feature of what it is. The flower that was noticed by a specific person at a specific moment, in the specific context of attending to a specific beloved, carries the trace of that specific existence within itself—not as a property of the flower's material constitution but as an existential layer that is inseparable from the flower's identity as this particular object at this particular moment in this particular relational field.

The relational subject: The subject whose spatiotemporal structure is at stake is not the individual subject alone but the relational subject—the subject constituted through and in the co-evolutionary dynamics of the intimate relational field. The flower is noticed not by an individual in isolation but by an individual who is already, in their very mode of attention, shaped by the relation with the beloved: who notices the flower because the history of this specific relation has cultivated in them the attentional sensitivity that makes this flower visible as something to be shared. The embedding is therefore always already relational: it is the trace not merely of an individual subject's existence but of a relational subject's existence—of a mode of being-in-the-world that has been co-constituted through the shared life.

7.5.2 Existence-Attestation: The Ontological Event of Embedding

The embedding of a subject's spatiotemporal structure in an object is not merely a psychological event—a matter of the subject's intentions or feelings—but an **ontological**

event: an event in which the subject's existence, their mode of being-in-the-world at a specific moment, leaves a permanent trace in the object's identity. We call this event **existence-attestation:** the act by which a subject's existence is attested in an object, made present and permanent in a form that can be received by a relational other.

The concept of attestation is drawn from Paul Ricoeur's account of selfhood and narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992). For Ricoeur, attestation is the fundamental mode in which the self is known to itself and to others: not through Cartesian certainty or empirical verification, but through the performative act of bearing witness—testifying, through action and narrative, to what one is and what one cares about. Attestation is not proof; it is the fundamental mode of first-person self-knowledge and of the communication of that knowledge to others.

Existence-attestation in the relational luxury object is attestation through material form: the subject attests their existence—their presence, their attention, their care for the specific other—by embedding that existence in an object that can be received by the other. The flower that is brought to the beloved is not merely a pleasant object; it is the material attestation of the giver's existence in a specific spatiotemporal moment, made permanent and giveable in the form of a living thing.

The ontological character of existence-attestation distinguishes it from psychological characterisations of the gift in terms of intention or sentiment. The giver's intentions and sentiments are relevant—they determine whether genuine embedding occurs—but they are not themselves the embedding. The embedding is in the object, not in the subject's psychology. This means that existence-attestation can be genuine or spurious: if the giver's spatiotemporal structure is genuinely embedded in the object, the attestation is real; if the object merely carries the economic value that the sign system associates with serious intimate commitment, without genuine subject-embedding, the attestation is spurious—a simulation of intimacy that has the form of attestation without its substance.

Existence-attestation as ontological event. Existence-attestation is the ontological event by which a subject's spatiotemporal structure—their intentionality, their presence,

their care directed specifically toward this relational other—becomes embedded in an object as an ineliminable feature of that object’s identity. It is not a psychological fact about the giver’s intentions but an ontological fact about the object. The relational luxury object is the object in which existence-attestation has genuinely occurred; the economically expensive but relationally empty object is the object in which existence-attestation has been simulated by sign exchange value without genuine subject-embedding.

7.5.3 The Four Dimensions of Coupling Degree

The coupling degree κ is not a single-dimensional measure but a four-dimensional one. The four dimensions correspond to the four ways in which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure can be more or less embedded in an object.

Temporal depth (κ_t): The temporal extent of the subject’s investment in the object. Temporal depth has two forms that must be distinguished: the **breadth** of immediate presence (the flower noticed and brought in the immediacy of a single moment, in which the subject’s full attention is present) and the **depth** of sustained investment (the diamond ring that represents years of saving, planning, and anticipatory attention). Both forms constitute temporal embedding, but they embed different qualities of the subject’s temporal existence: the flower embeds the fullness of a moment, the ring embeds the sustained trajectory of a period of life. Neither is inherently higher in κ_t ; they are different temporal structures, each genuinely embedded.

Intentional intensity (κ_i): The degree to which the object was chosen specifically for *this* relational other, with attention to their particular character, preferences, and relational history. High intentional intensity means: this object was chosen because of what this specific person is, not because it is the most expensive option in the relevant category, not because it is what social convention requires, but because the giver’s knowledge and attention to this specific person made this specific object the right one. The intentional intensity of the flower found on the path may be very high—the giver immediately thought of this specific person and their love of natural beauty—or very low—the giver picked it up absently without specific thought of anyone. The intentional intensity of

the diamond ring may be high—chosen after careful attention to the specific beloved’s aesthetic preferences and the history of the relation—or very low—the most expensive ring in the jeweller’s, chosen because social convention says that the most expensive ring is the most serious expression of commitment.

Non-substitutability (κ_n): The degree to which the object is irreplaceable—the degree to which the specific object, found or made or chosen in this specific spatiotemporal context, could not have been replaced by any other object without loss of the embedding. A flower found in a specific crack in a specific pavement on a specific walk has high non-substitutability: no other flower, however similar, would carry the same embedding, because the embedding is constituted by the specific spatiotemporal moment of its finding. A diamond ring purchased from a catalogue has low non-substitutability: another ring of the same price and style would serve equally well as a carrier of the sign exchange value the ring is meant to convey, because the value is in the sign system position rather than in the specific object.

Existential investment (κ_e): The degree to which the subject has brought their full existence—not merely their resources but their attention, their vulnerability, their care—to the act of acquiring and giving the object. Existential investment is the most difficult of the four dimensions to specify, but it is also the most fundamental: it is the degree to which the subject has been genuinely present, in the full dimensionality of their being, to the act of giving. The giver who noticed the flower in the middle of a busy day, who stopped in the midst of their own concerns to attend to a moment of natural beauty and to carry that moment to the beloved, has invested existentially in a way that the giver who delegated the purchase to an assistant has not—regardless of the economic value of the resulting gifts.

The four dimensions are not independent but interact: high temporal depth combined with low intentional intensity produces a different kind of embedding from low temporal depth combined with high intentional intensity. The full coupling degree is a function of all four dimensions together, not a simple sum. And the four dimensions can be traded off against each other in ways that make the assessment of coupling degree contextually sensitive and not reducible to any single metric.

7.5.4 The Fourfold Classification: Economic and Relational Luxury as Orthogonal Dimensions

The independence of coupling degree from economic value produces a fourfold classification of objects in the intimate relational context, which represents the paper’s most practically accessible theoretical contribution:

	High sign exchange value	Low sign exchange value
High coupling degree (κ)	The long-saved diamond ring	The flower on the path
Low coupling degree (κ)	The proxy-purchased diamond	The absent-minded cheap gift

The upper-left cell—high sign exchange value, high coupling degree—represents objects that are both economically and relationally luxurious: the diamond ring that represents years of saving and sustained anticipatory attention to the specific beloved is both a sign of serious economic commitment and a genuine existence-attestation. The two forms of luxury are not in conflict here; they reinforce each other, and the object carries both the social signal of economic commitment and the relational signal of genuine subject-embedding.

The upper-right cell—low sign exchange value, high coupling degree—represents objects that are relationally luxurious without being economically so: the flower found on the path, the handmade gift that cost nothing but hours of attentive labour, the old photograph discovered in a drawer and shared at exactly the right moment. These objects have low position in the sign exchange value system but may carry very high coupling degree; they are the purest instances of relational luxury, uncomplicated by the phallic logic of economic competition.

The lower-left cell—high sign exchange value, low coupling degree—represents objects that are economically luxurious without being relationally so: the expensive gift purchased without attention to the specific beloved, the diamond ring chosen because it is the most expensive option in the jeweller’s rather than because it is right for this specific person. This cell is the domain of the phallic luxury analysed in §7.4.3: the object whose

value is entirely in its sign system position, whose existence-attestation is spurious, and whose apparent luxury conceals a relational poverty.

The lower-right cell—low sign exchange value, low coupling degree—represents objects that are neither economically nor relationally luxurious: the absent-minded purchase, the conventional gift given without attention to the specific person or the specific moment. This cell is not inherently negative—there are many occasions when neither economic luxury nor relational luxury is appropriate—but in the context of intimate relational life, it represents a missed opportunity for existence-attestation.

7.5.5 The Dual Luxury of the Long-Saved Ring

The upper-left cell—the long-saved diamond ring—deserves particular attention, because it represents the most complex case for the theory of relational luxury and anticipates the justice theory of §7.8.

The diamond ring that a person saves for years to give to their beloved is both economically luxurious and relationally luxurious. Its economic luxury is constituted by its position in the sign exchange value system. Its relational luxury is constituted by the coupling degree: the years of saving and planning embed a substantial temporal structure of the giving subject's existence in the ring; the sustained anticipatory attention to the specific beloved embeds a high degree of intentional intensity; the ring's identity as the ring that was saved for, planned for, and chosen specifically for this person at this moment embeds a non-substitutability that a casually purchased equivalent ring would not carry.

The dual luxury of the long-saved ring demonstrates that economic and relational luxury are not opposed but can reinforce each other. The economic value of the ring is not merely a sign system position; it is also the material trace of the temporal investment—the years of labour and saving that the ring represents. The sign exchange value and the coupling degree overlap in this case: the economic value is itself a form of existence-attestation, because it represents a substantial investment of the giving subject's temporal and existential resources.

But the dual luxury of the long-saved ring also reveals the conditions under which eco-

conomic luxury can generate relational luxury: economic value translates into coupling degree only when the economic investment itself represents a genuine temporal structure of the subject's existence, when it is genuinely costly in existential terms rather than merely in monetary terms. The millionaire who buys the same ring without thought or effort has the same economic luxury but far lower coupling degree: the economic investment does not represent the same existential investment because it does not cost the same existential resources.

7.5.6 Reception Structure: The Completion of Coupling

The coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure is not completed at the moment of giving but at the moment of **receiving**. Receiving, in the context of relational luxury, is not a passive act of acceptance but an active act of recognition: the receiver must recognise and the existence-attestation embedded in the object for the coupling to be fully realised.

This means that the relational luxury of an object is not solely a property of the object itself but a property of the **relational event** of giving and receiving: it depends on both the giver's existence-attestation and the receiver's recognition. A flower given with high coupling degree but received without recognition of the embedding—received merely as a pleasant object rather than as the attestation of a specific existence at a specific moment—has not fully realised its relational luxury potential, even though the embedding is genuinely present.

The reception structure also reveals the dialogic character of relational luxury: genuine relational luxury requires a receiver who has developed the **sensibility**—the attentional capacity, the relational history, the qualitative awareness—to recognise existence-attestation when they encounter it. The development of this sensibility is the domain of §7.7, which examines sensibility as a cultivated relational capacity rather than an innate aesthetic property.

7.5.7 Relational Luxury as GRW Medium

The relational luxury object is not merely a gift within the intimate relation; it is a **medium of GRW generation and storage**. The high-coupling-degree object enters

the relational field as a relational event—a spike in the couple’s co-evolutionary dynamics, a moment of heightened coupling that produces structural modification of the shared attractor landscape. The flower brought from the path is the paradigmatic happiness jar event: a contingent occurrence in the natural world, noticed by a subject whose attention has been shaped by the relation, transformed into a relational event through the act of sharing, and stored in the relational field as a permanent structural modification.

This connection between relational luxury and GRW completes the series’ trajectory from [Paper XIV](#)’s account of the shared flower as the paradigm of relational happiness (Wanhong 2026), through [Paper XV](#)’s analysis of the happiness jar as GRW’s paradigmatic accumulation practice (Huang 2026b), to the present paper’s account of relational luxury as the material dimension of GRW generation. The flower on the path is simultaneously: a moment of contingent beauty ([Paper XIV](#)), a happiness jar event that generates GRW ([Paper XV](#)), and a relational luxury object whose coupling degree constitutes its genuine luxuriousness ([Paper XVI](#)). The three accounts are not parallel but nested: each adds a dimension that the others do not capture, and together they constitute a complete account of what happens when one person brings a flower to another.

Relational luxury as GRW medium. The high-coupling-degree object functions as a medium of GRW generation: it enters the relational field as a relational event, produces structural modification of the shared attractor landscape through the existence-attestation it carries, and is stored in the happiness jar as a permanent trace of the co-evolutionary moment it generated. Relational luxury is not a supplement to GRW but one of its primary material forms: the form in which the abstract dynamics of co-evolutionary happiness generation become tangible, giveable, and receivable as objects in the world.

7.6. The Dialectical Synthesis of the Three Doctrines

The three doctrines have each illuminated a distinct dimension of luxury in intimate relations. The first doctrine showed us the aesthetic and material structure of the genuine luxury object: its double temporality, its craft singularity, its capacity for Danto's transfiguration. The second doctrine showed us how luxury functions in the symbolic order: as sign exchange value, differential position, and phallic signifier. The third doctrine proposed the concept that transforms our understanding of both: the coupling degree between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure, the existence-attestation that converts a material object into a relational luxury object. Now we must show how the three doctrines relate to each other—not as independent analyses of separate phenomena but as dialectically unified moments in a single account of luxury in intimate life.

7.6.1 The Three-Layer Structure of Luxury Experience

The deepest luxury experience in intimate relations is not the experience of any single doctrine alone but the experience of all three simultaneously—the moment in which the natural-artisanal, the symbolic, and the relational layers are all present and mutually reinforcing. This three-layer structure can be described phenomenologically before being given its theoretical articulation.

Consider a specific object: a piece of jewellery—a ring, let us say—that has been made by a craftsperson using a gemstone with a distinctive natural colour, that carries the maker's mark of a tradition the giver has long admired, that belongs to a recognisable luxury house but is not its most famous or most expensive piece, and that was chosen because the giver, over the course of months of attentive attention to the beloved, recognised that this specific stone's colour was exactly the colour of a particular quality of light that the beloved had once pointed out on a walk together.

The first layer is present: the object carries the geological time of the stone and the artisanal time of the craftsperson's attention. Its singularity is material and biographical: this stone, with its specific colour and its specific inclusions, was formed under specific conditions that will never be exactly replicated; this setting was made by a craftsperson

whose hands have shaped it in ways that distinguish it from every other setting of the same design.

The second layer is present: the object carries sign exchange value within the symbolic order of luxury. The maker's mark signals craft tradition and cultural prestige; the material signals economic investment; the form signals aesthetic judgement and cultural knowledge. Anyone familiar with the symbolic order of luxury will read these signals and understand something about the giver's social position and the seriousness of their commitment.

The third layer is present: the object carries a high coupling degree. The giver's temporally sustained attention to the beloved—months of noticing, of remembering, of attentive care—is embedded in the choice. The intentional intensity is high: the object was chosen specifically because this colour is the colour of a specific moment the beloved had pointed out, a moment that the giver had held in memory across months. The non-substitutability is high: no other ring would carry this specific connection to that specific moment of shared attention. The existential investment is genuine: the giver has brought something of their attentional history to this act of giving.

In the experience of receiving this ring, all three layers are simultaneously present. The receiver holds a piece of geological time in their hand; they read the symbolic signals of quality and commitment; and they recognise—in the colour of the stone—the trace of a specific shared moment, the evidence that the giver has been attentive across months to something the receiver once pointed out. The recognition of the third layer transforms the experience of the first two: the geological time of the stone becomes the geological time of *this* stone, chosen because of its colour; the sign exchange value of the luxury brand becomes the sign exchange value of *this* object, whose full value cannot be read from the sign system alone.

7.6.2 The Three Registers Revisited

The three doctrines map onto the three Lacanian registers—imaginary, symbolic, and real—in a structure that the GRB series has been developing across the preceding papers.

The first doctrine and the imaginary register: The aesthetic and natural dimen-

sion of luxury—the beauty of the gemstone, the elegance of the design, the ideal of craftsmanship—belongs primarily to the imaginary register: the register of the image, of idealisation, of the visual and the specular. The luxury object of the first doctrine is an idealised form: the natural world given ideal form through human craft, the beautiful made permanent and wearable. The pleasure of the luxury object at this level is the pleasure of the image—the visual pleasure of a beautiful thing whose beauty has been stabilised and made available to sustained contemplation.

The second doctrine and the symbolic register: The sign exchange value dimension of luxury belongs to the symbolic register: the register of the signifier, of difference, of the social bond constituted through language and exchange. The luxury object of the second doctrine is a signifier in the social symbolic order: its value is constituted by its differential position in a system of differences, its meaning is socially produced and socially legible, and its function is to position the possessor within the symbolic hierarchy. The pleasure of the luxury object at this level is the pleasure of symbolic recognition—the pleasure of occupying a recognised and valued position in the social symbolic order.

The third doctrine and the real register: The coupling degree dimension of luxury belongs to the real register: the register of what resists symbolisation, of the irreducibly particular, of what exceeds every symbolic account. The relational luxury object of the third doctrine is not a sign within a sign system but an existence-attestation—a material trace of a specific subject's specific existence at a specific moment, carrying within itself something that cannot be fully symbolised or exchanged. The pleasure of the relational luxury object at this level is not the pleasure of the image or the pleasure of symbolic recognition but the pleasure of genuine encounter—the encounter with the specific existence of the other, mediated through an object that carries that existence as an ineliminable feature of its identity.

The three-register structure reveals the conditions under which luxury can be genuinely intimate—genuinely connected to the reality of the intimate relational field—rather than merely imaginary (organised by idealisation) or merely symbolic (organised by sign exchange value). Genuine intimate luxury requires the real register to be present: requires that the object carry something that exceeds the imaginary and the symbolic, something that belongs to the irreducible particularity of a specific existence and a specific relational

history.

7.6.3 The Transfiguration Sequence: Natural, Artisanal, Relational

Danto's concept of the transfiguration of the commonplace (Danto 1981) identified the first transformation: the conversion of the natural material into a luxury object through its insertion into the artworld context of craft tradition and aesthetic valuation. But there are two further transfigurations that the complete account of relational luxury requires.

The **first transfiguration** is artisanal: natural material is transformed into luxury object through the craftsperson's sustained attention. A rough diamond is transfigured into a cut stone; a bar of gold is transfigured into a jewellery setting; a piece of leather is transfigured into a luxury accessory. This transfiguration is the domain of the first doctrine: it produces the aesthetic and material properties that make the object a genuine luxury rather than merely an expensive commodity.

The **second transfiguration** is symbolic: the luxury object is transfigured into a sign exchange value carrier through its insertion into the symbolic order of the luxury market—through the application of the brand's mark, the retail context, the social codes of luxury consumption. This transfiguration is the domain of the second doctrine: it produces the sign exchange value properties that make the object socially legible as luxury and organise its circulation within the consumer society.

The **third transfiguration** is relational: the luxury object is transfigured into a relational luxury object through its insertion into the specific history of an intimate relational field—through the giver's act of existence-attestation and the receiver's act of recognition. This transfiguration is the domain of the third doctrine: it produces the coupling degree that makes the object genuinely intimate, a material trace of the specific co-evolutionary dynamics of a specific relational field.

The three transfigurations are not necessarily sequential: all three can occur simultaneously, or any one can occur without the others. What distinguishes the relationally luxurious experience is the presence of the third transfiguration—which is why a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond ring, and why the long-saved diamond ring can be genuinely doubly luxurious while the proxy-purchased diamond ring is merely economi-

cally so.

The three transfigurations. Luxury in intimate relations involves three possible transfigurations: the artisanal transfiguration of natural material into aesthetic object (first doctrine), the symbolic transfiguration of aesthetic object into sign exchange value carrier (second doctrine), and the relational transfiguration of any object into existence-attestation through the giver's act of subject-embedding and the receiver's act of recognition (third doctrine). The presence of the third transfiguration is what constitutes genuine intimate luxury; the first and second transfigurations can support or complicate it, but they do not determine it. A flower can undergo the third transfiguration without the first or second; a diamond ring can undergo the first and second without the third.

7.6.4 The Tension Between Doctrines: When Sign Exchange Value Threatens Coupling

The three doctrines are not always harmonious. There are structural tensions between them—particularly between the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic and the third doctrine's coupling degree logic—that the synthesis must acknowledge rather than paper over.

The most significant tension is the **substitution pressure** that sign exchange value exerts on existence-attestation. Because the sign exchange value of a luxury object is organised by its position in a hierarchy of economic value, there is constant structural pressure to substitute higher-value objects for lower-value ones as expressions of intimate commitment: to replace the flower with the ring, the ring with the more expensive ring, the more expensive ring with the most expensive option. This substitution pressure is organised by the logic of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899): the more expensive the gift, the more seriously the commitment is taken by the social symbolic order, and therefore the more adequate the sign exchange value as an expression of the intimate bond.

But the substitution logic is precisely what destroys coupling degree: the object chosen because it is the most expensive option has, typically, lower coupling degree than the object chosen because it is right for this specific person at this specific moment. The flower that cannot be substituted by any more expensive flower—because its coupling degree is constituted by its specific spatiotemporal context, not by its market position—is precisely what the substitution logic cannot accommodate. The substitution logic treats objects as commensurable, as replaceable by more expensive equivalents, and it is therefore constitutively hostile to the non-substitutability that is one of the four dimensions of coupling degree.

A second tension is the **social visibility pressure** that sign exchange value exerts on the intimacy of the relational event. The sign exchange value of the luxury gift is constituted by its social legibility: its value depends on being seen, recognised, and read as luxury within the social symbolic order. This social legibility is oriented outward—toward the social world that reads the sign—rather than inward, toward the intimate relational field that constitutes the authentic context of the gift. The relational luxury object, by contrast, is constituted by its inward orientation: its coupling degree is a property of the specific relational history that it embeds, and this property may be entirely invisible to the social symbolic order. The most relationally luxurious gifts are often socially invisible: the flower, the handmade object, the found thing that carries a shared memory invisible to any observer outside the specific relation.

The tension between social visibility and relational intimacy is the tension between the second and third doctrines in its most acute form. It is managed, in mature intimate relations, by a cultivated capacity to hold both orientations simultaneously—to appreciate both the social meaning and the relational meaning of an object, and to ensure that the relational meaning is primary. But the structural pressure of consumer society, which continuously reinforces the social over the relational orientation, makes this management a genuine ethical and practical challenge.

7.6.5 Synthesis: The Hierarchy of Doctrines in Intimate Life

The dialectical synthesis of the three doctrines does not dissolve their tensions into a harmonious unity but proposes a **hierarchy of doctrines** that is appropriate to the

context of intimate relational life: a hierarchy in which the third doctrine is primary, the first doctrine is supporting, and the second doctrine is secondary.

The third doctrine is primary in intimate relational life because the primary value of intimate relations is co-evolutionary generativity—the generation of GRW through the coupling of two relational subjects’ co-evolutionary dynamics. In this context, the coupling degree of objects is the most fundamental measure of their value as intimate gifts: what matters most is whether the object carries the existence-attestation of the giver, whether it embeds a genuine relational event in a material form that can be received and held.

The first doctrine is supporting: the aesthetic and material properties of the luxury object can deepen and enrich the coupling degree by providing a carrier of appropriate weight, beauty, and singularity for the existence-attestation it is meant to embody. A beautiful, singular, well-crafted object is a more adequate carrier for a high-coupling-degree existence-attestation than a cheap, mass-produced one—not because beauty is necessary for relational luxury (the flower is neither expensive nor crafted) but because the first doctrine’s singularity resonates with the third doctrine’s non-substitutability, and the first doctrine’s double temporality resonates with the third doctrine’s temporal depth.

The second doctrine is secondary in intimate relational life—not absent but subordinate. The sign exchange value of the luxury gift is not irrelevant: it carries genuine information about the giver’s social position and the seriousness of their commitment, and in contexts where material security is at issue, this information is genuinely important. But the second doctrine’s value is instrumental rather than intrinsic in the intimate context: it matters insofar as it supports the material conditions for GRW generation, not insofar as it positions the couple within the social symbolic order.

This hierarchy is not a universal claim about the value of the three doctrines in all contexts; it is a contextual claim about their appropriate weighting in the specific context of intimate relational life. In other contexts—the assessment of investment value, the study of social distinction, the analysis of the luxury market—the hierarchy might be different. But in the context of intimate relations, where the primary value is co-evolutionary flour-

ishing and the primary form of wealth is GRW, the third doctrine's coupling degree is the measure that matters most.

7.7. The Political Economy of Sensibility

The theory of relational luxury developed in the preceding sections has identified coupling degree as the true measure of luxury in intimate relations and existence-attestation as its ontological foundation. But this theory presupposes a capacity that has not yet been adequately theorised: the capacity to **recognise** coupling degree—to perceive, in a specific object given in a specific relational context, the existence-attestation it carries; to identify, in the colour of a stone, the trace of a shared moment; to understand, in the act of receiving, what has been attested. We call this capacity **sensibility**, and we argue that its cultivation is both a personal ethical achievement and a political-economic problem.

7.7.1 Sensibility as a Cultivated Recognitional Capacity

Sensibility, in the context of relational luxury, is not a natural gift—an innate capacity to appreciate beauty or to feel deeply—but a **cultivated recognitional capacity**: a developed ability to perceive the coupling degree of objects in intimate relational contexts, to distinguish existence-attestation from sign exchange value simulation, and to receive with appropriate recognition what has been genuinely embedded.

The distinction between natural gift and cultivated capacity is philosophically important. A natural gift is given, not achieved; it reflects the contingent endowment of the recipient and cannot be systematically developed through practice. A cultivated capacity is achieved through sustained practice and appropriate conditions; it can be developed, deepened, and shared, and its development is a legitimate object of pedagogical and political concern.

Sensibility in the recognitional sense has three components. The first is **attentional sensitivity**: the capacity to notice the particular—to perceive the specific colour of this stone, the specific texture of this material, the specific quality of this moment—rather than the generic categories within which the particular is typically subsumed. The

attentive receiver of a relational luxury gift is not the receiver who categorises the gift by its economic value, its brand, or its social signal, but the receiver who perceives its particular properties and can relate those properties to the specific history of the intimate relation.

The second component is **relational memory**: the accumulated history of shared attentive experience that allows the receiver to recognise, in the specific properties of the gift, the trace of a shared moment or a shared attentiveness. The receiver who can identify the colour of the stone as the colour of a specific quality of light that the giver once pointed out on a walk together has, through the shared history of the relation, developed a relational memory that makes this recognition possible. Without this relational memory—without the accumulated history of joint attention and shared noticing that constitutes the intimate relational field—the recognition of existence-attestation is impossible: there is nothing in the receiver’s relational history against which the coupling can be registered.

The third component is **interpretive generosity**: the disposition to interpret the gift as the most genuine expression of care that it could be—to seek the existence-attestation within the object rather than dismissing the object for its economic modesty or its departure from social convention. Interpretive generosity is not credulity—it does not require the receiver to overlook the absence of genuine coupling where no coupling exists—but it requires the active willingness to receive what is offered, to attend to what the object carries rather than to what the sign system says it should carry.

7.7.2 Sensibility and the Capacity for Relational Luxury: A Democratic Aspiration

The capacity for sensibility in the recognitional sense is, in principle, democratically available: it does not require economic resources, social position, or access to luxury markets. The capacity to notice the colour of a flower, to remember a shared moment of attention, and to receive a gift as the attestation of specific care—these capacities are not the exclusive property of any social class or any economic group. They require attentional practice, relational history, and interpretive generosity, but none of these are purchased; they are developed through the quality of relational engagement itself.

This democratic aspiration is the relational luxury account’s most politically significant implication. If the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is coupling degree rather

than economic value, and if the capacity to generate and recognise high coupling degree is democratically available in principle, then genuine intimate luxury is not the exclusive province of the economically privileged. The person of limited economic means who brings a flower with genuine attentiveness and relational care is performing a more luxurious act—in the sense that matters most for intimate relational flourishing—than the wealthy person who delegates the purchase of an expensive gift to an assistant.

But the democratic aspiration must be qualified by an honest account of the conditions that make sensibility possible. Sensibility requires attentional practice—the sustained cultivation of the capacity for attentive noticing that the consumer environment systematically undermines. It requires relational history—the accumulated experience of shared attentiveness that only sustained intimate engagement can provide. And it requires **time**: the time to notice, to attend, to remember, to choose with care. Time is the most unequally distributed resource in contemporary society: those whose working conditions require long hours, multiple jobs, or constant availability have less time for the attentional practices that sensibility requires. The democratic availability of sensibility is therefore conditioned by the political economy of time—and the unequal distribution of time is one of the primary mechanisms by which the democratic aspiration of relational luxury is constrained in practice.

The democratic potential and its conditions. The capacity to generate and recognise relational luxury—high coupling degree, genuine existence-attestation—is democratically available in principle: it does not require economic resources but attentional practice, relational history, and interpretive generosity. But this democratic potential is conditioned by the political economy of time and attention: the unequal distribution of attentional resources means that sensibility, while not inherently a class privilege, is in practice more easily developed by those whose material conditions allow for the cultivation of attentive presence. The political project of democratising relational luxury therefore requires not only the cultural recognition of coupling degree as a genuine measure of luxury but the material transformation of the conditions that make attentional practice possible.

7.7.3 The Corruption of Sensibility: Consumer Culture's Systematic Distortion

The democratic aspiration of relational luxury is systematically threatened by the consumer culture that the second doctrine's analysis identified. Consumer culture corrupts sensibility in specific and identifiable ways, each of which substitutes the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic for the third doctrine's coupling degree logic.

The substitution of price for value: Consumer culture trains its participants to read economic value as a proxy for relational value—to interpret the expensive gift as evidence of serious care and the inexpensive gift as evidence of insufficient care. This substitution corrupts sensibility by replacing the attentional capacity to perceive coupling degree with the cognitive shortcut of reading the price tag. The receiver who has been trained by consumer culture to read the price of the gift rather than its coupling degree has had their sensibility corrupted: they have been taught to see the second doctrine's sign exchange value where they should see the third doctrine's existence-attestation.

The standardisation of intimate expression: Consumer culture provides standardised templates for the expression of intimate care: the dozen red roses for Valentine's Day, the diamond ring for the engagement, the gold watch for the significant anniversary. These templates are not inherently corrupt—a dozen red roses can carry high coupling degree if chosen with genuine attentiveness to this specific person at this specific moment—but they systematically undermine sensibility by providing pre-packaged solutions that substitute social convention for individual attentiveness. The person who gives the standard template gift has been relieved of the attentional labour that genuine coupling degree requires; the person who receives the standard template gift has been denied the possibility of recognising existence-attestation, because the gift's meaning is already determined by convention rather than by the giver's specific care.

The digital mediation of intimate attention: The digital environment—with its algorithmic curation of attention, its endless streams of commercially produced content, and its systematic capture of attentional resources for commercial purposes—represents the most pervasive contemporary threat to the attentional practice that sensibility re-

quires. The person whose attention is predominantly mediated by digital platforms has less attentional capacity available for the slow, patient, unmediated noticing that generates high coupling degree and the relational memory that recognises it.

7.7.4 The Cultivation of Sensibility: Practices of Relational Attentiveness

Sensibility can be cultivated, and its cultivation is continuous with the practices of relational attentiveness that [Paper XIV](#)'s praxis chapter identified as the conditions for relational happiness (Wanhong 2026). The practices that lower the threshold for co-evolutionary engagement—the daily noticing of contingent events, the timely sharing of perceived beauties, the digital unplugging that protects attentional space—are simultaneously practices of sensibility cultivation.

Several specific practices are particularly relevant to sensibility in the context of relational luxury.

The practice of specific noticing: The deliberate cultivation of the capacity to notice the particular—the specific colour, the specific texture, the specific quality of a moment—rather than the generic category. This practice is not primarily an aesthetic discipline but a relational one: one notices specifically for the other, with the other's specific character and preferences in mind, and the noticing is already an act of relational attentiveness that can generate coupling degree even before the noticed thing is given.

The practice of relational memory: The deliberate cultivation of the shared narrative of attentive experiences—the maintenance of the relational history of what has been noticed and shared, of what has been received and recognised. The happiness jar of [Paper XV](#) is one form of this practice (Huang 2026b): the deliberate recording and processing of shared moments of contingent beauty that builds the relational memory against which future existence-attestations can be recognised.

The practice of receiving: The deliberate cultivation of the capacity to receive gifts with full attentiveness—to hold the gift in attention long enough to perceive what it carries, to relate its properties to the relational history that makes the coupling degree legible, to express the recognition of existence-attestation in a way that completes the giving-receiving circuit. The practice of receiving is the complement of the practice of

giving: without it, the existence-attestation embedded in the gift cannot be fully realised.

7.7.5 Nature as the Most Accessible Site of Sensibility

Among the domains in which sensibility can be cultivated and relational luxury can be generated, nature occupies a privileged position—not because natural objects are inherently more valuable than crafted ones, but because nature provides the most democratically accessible form of the singularity and contingent particularity that high coupling degree requires.

The flower found on the path is singular in a specific sense: it is this flower, in this place, at this time, in this specific quality of light and temperature and growing condition. Its singularity is not the singularity of the rare gemstone, which is rare because geological processes rarely produce it; it is the singularity of the particular, which is particular because no two moments of existence are identical. Every natural encounter is unique in this sense: the bird heard through an open window at a specific moment of a specific morning; the quality of light at a specific instant of a walk taken at a specific season; the smell of rain on a specific afternoon. None of these natural events can be reproduced, and all of them, in the right relational context, can carry very high coupling degree.

The natural object's singularity is also, crucially, free from the sign exchange value logic of the luxury market. The flower cannot be branded; its value cannot be constituted by its differential position in a hierarchy of marketed natural objects (there is no Bulgari of wildflowers). This freedom from the sign exchange value system makes the natural object the purest possible carrier of relational luxury—the object whose value is entirely constituted by the coupling degree it carries, with no contamination from the second doctrine's differential logic.

This connection between nature and relational luxury recovers a dimension of the first doctrine that the luxury market tends to suppress: the dimension in which natural materials are valued not for their rarity in the geological or economic sense but for their participation in the contingent particularity of natural existence. The gemstone in the jeweller's window has had its natural particularity processed and standardised for the market; the flower on the path has not. The flower retains the full singularity of the natural event, and it is available to anyone with the attentional capacity to notice it.

Nature as the paradigm of democratic relational luxury. Nature provides the most democratically accessible paradigm of relational luxury: natural objects are constitutively singular (no two natural moments are identical), constitutively free from sign exchange value (nature cannot be branded), and constitutively available (natural environments are more accessible than luxury markets). The flower on the path is the paradigm of democratic relational luxury not despite its economic modesty but because of it: its value is entirely constituted by coupling degree, with no contamination from the sign exchange value system. The cultivation of sensibility to natural particularity is the most accessible form of relational luxury cultivation.

7.8. The Justice Theory of Choice

The theory of relational luxury developed across the preceding sections is not merely descriptive; it carries normative implications that constitute a distinctive justice theory. The choice of one form of luxury over another—the choice of the flower over the diamond, or the diamond over the flower, or one mode of giving over another—is not merely a matter of personal taste but a value declaration with justice dimensions. This section develops the justice theory of choice in three movements: the problem of subject-embedding misrecognition, the problem of equivalent agency, and the constructive account of selection justice.

The justice theory developed here is, by the standards of the dominant frameworks, unusual: it does not concern the distribution of goods, the protection of rights, or the maximisation of welfare, but the integrity of existence-attestation—the question of whether what is presented as carrying a subject’s existence genuinely carries it, and whether the substitution of one form of existence-attestation for another is just. This is a justice of the real register: a justice concerned with the genuineness of existence-attestation rather than the fairness of distribution.

7.8.1 Subject-Embedding Misrecognition: The True Problem Domain

The justice theory of choice begins not with the question of what to choose but with a prior epistemological question: **is the subject-embedding that an object presents itself as carrying genuinely present, and is it accurately recognised?** This question identifies the true problem domain of the justice theory: the domain of subject-embedding misrecognition, in which the relationship between an object's apparent and actual coupling degree is distorted.

Subject-embedding misrecognition takes three forms, corresponding to three loci of distortion.

The giver's self-misrecognition: The first form occurs when the giver misrecognises their own existence-attestation—when they believe that they have embedded their existence in an object that, in fact, carries low coupling degree. The paradigmatic case is the giver who believes that economic expenditure is equivalent to existential embedding: who delegates the purchase of an expensive gift to an assistant and sincerely believes that the resulting gift expresses the depth of their care, because they have confused the economic cost of the gift with the existential cost of genuine attentiveness.

This self-misrecognition is the most insidious form because it operates beneath the giver's awareness. The giver is not consciously simulating care; they genuinely believe that they are expressing it. The consumer ideology that systematically equates economic value with relational value—that trains its participants to read the price of a gift as a measure of the love it expresses—makes this self-misrecognition natural and pervasive. The giver who has internalised this ideology cannot easily distinguish their economic expenditure from their existential investment, because the ideology has collapsed the distinction.

The receiver's induced misrecognition: The second form occurs when the receiver is induced to misrecognise the coupling degree of an object—when the sign exchange value of an expensive object induces the receiver to believe that it carries high coupling degree when, in fact, it does not. This is the precise analogue, in the domain of luxury, of the forged trust analysed in [Paper XIII](#) (Huang 2026a): the inducement of the receiver's generative model to lower its prediction error—to trust, to feel cared for, to believe in the giver's existential investment—without the provision of a genuine high-fidelity signal

of that investment.

The mechanism of induced misrecognition is the sign exchange value system itself: because consumer culture has established the convention that expensive gifts express serious care, the receiver who has internalised this convention reads the expensive gift as evidence of care, even when the gift carries low coupling degree. The expensive diamond, purchased without genuine attentiveness, induces the belief in existential investment through its sign exchange value alone—“he spent so much, he must really love me”—and this induced belief is a misrecognition of the actual coupling degree.

The social collective misrecognition: The third form is structural rather than individual: it is the collective misrecognition, embedded in the social symbolic order, that equates economic value with coupling degree as a general matter. This collective misrecognition is the cultural condition that makes the individual forms possible: it is because the society as a whole has come to read economic value as a proxy for relational value that individual givers can misrecognise their own attestation and individual receivers can be induced to misrecognise what they receive.

The social collective misrecognition has a specific and damaging consequence: it renders the flower invisible. Within a symbolic order that equates economic value with coupling degree, the relationally luxurious but economically modest gift—the flower, the handmade object, the found thing carrying a shared memory—cannot be recognised as luxury at all. It is systematically devalued, dismissed as charming but insignificant, because the collective misrecognition has no category for high coupling degree at low economic value. The social collective misrecognition is thus the cultural mechanism by which the third doctrine’s central insight—that coupling degree is the true measure of intimate luxury—is rendered culturally invisible.

The three forms of subject-embedding misrecognition. Subject-embedding misrecognition—the distortion of the relationship between an object’s apparent and actual coupling degree—takes three forms: the giver’s self-misrecognition (confusing economic expenditure with existential investment), the receiver’s induced misrecognition (being led

by sign exchange value to perceive coupling degree that is not present), and the social collective misrecognition (the cultural equation of economic value with coupling degree that renders the flower invisible). These three forms are mutually reinforcing: the social collective misrecognition is the cultural condition that makes the individual forms possible, and the individual forms reproduce the collective misrecognition.

7.8.2 The Problem of Equivalent Agency

The second movement of the justice theory addresses a problem that is more subtle than misrecognition and that constitutes the theory's most original contribution: the problem of **equivalent agency**.

The problem arises as follows. A subject wishes to provide an existence-attestation *A*—the immediate, present, full-attention embedding of the flower found on the path, say. But the subject cannot provide *A*: they are not in the place where the flower grows, they do not have the time for the walk on which it would be found, the spatiotemporal conditions for *A* are not available to them. Instead, the subject provides *B*—a different form of existence-attestation, such as the long-saved ring, which embeds a different temporal structure (sustained investment over time rather than immediate presence). The subject substitutes *B* for *A*: they use one form of existence-attestation in place of another that they cannot provide.

Is this substitution just?

The question is genuinely difficult, because *A* and *B* are not equivalent in their structure. They embed different temporal structures, produce different qualities of coupling, and carry different existential meanings. From the standpoint of **structural justice**—a justice concerned with the structural identity of what is provided—the substitution of *B* for *A* is a form of alienation: *B* is not *A*, and the substitution presents *B* as if it were equivalent to *A* when it is structurally heterogeneous. Certain justice frameworks, attentive to this structural heterogeneity, will judge equivalent agency as unjust: as the passing-off of one thing for another, the substitution of a different (and possibly lesser)

existence-attestation for the one that was due.

But from the standpoint of **generative justice**—the framework developed in [Paper XV](#) ([Huang 2026b](#)), concerned with whether the generative process is just rather than whether the products are structurally identical—the substitution may be just, under specific conditions. The generative justice analysis asks not “is *B* structurally identical to *A*?” (it is not) but “is the generative process by which *B* was provided in place of *A* a just process?” And this question can have an affirmative answer even when *A* and *B* are structurally heterogeneous.

The Four Necessary Conditions

Equivalent agency is just in the generative sense only if four conditions are satisfied. These conditions are **necessary but not sufficient**—a crucial qualification developed below.

Condition 1: Symmetric generability. In ideal conditions—conditions without the real constraints that force the substitution—both *A* and *B* would be within the subject’s generative range. The subject is not substituting *B* for *A* because they are incapable of *A* in principle, or because they do not understand what *A* would require, but because specific real circumstances prevent *A* in this instance. The symmetry condition ensures that the substitution is not a permanent incapacity masquerading as a temporary constraint: the subject who could never provide *A*—who has no capacity for the immediate, present, full-attention embedding that *A* requires—is not engaged in just equivalent agency when they provide *B*; they are providing the only thing they can provide, which is a different matter.

Condition 2: Real constraint. The circumstances that force the substitution of *B* for *A* are genuine, not pretextual. The subject genuinely cannot provide *A*—because of real limitations of time, space, or resources—rather than choosing *B* over *A* out of laziness, indifference, or a preference for the social legibility of *B*. The real constraint condition distinguishes genuine equivalent agency from the use of constraint as an excuse: “I was too busy to find the flower, so I bought the ring” is just equivalent agency only if the busyness is a genuine constraint rather than a rationalisation of the preference for the more socially legible gift.

Condition 3: Genuine embedding in B . The substitute B genuinely carries the subject's existence-attestation; it is not a mere economic substitute but a real, if different, form of subject-embedding. The long-saved ring is a just substitute for the flower only if it genuinely embeds the subject's existence—the years of saving, the sustained anticipatory attention, the specific choice for this specific person—rather than merely carrying the sign exchange value that the consumer convention associates with serious commitment. If B is a genuine existence-attestation (even of a different structure from A), the substitution can be just; if B is a mere economic substitute with low coupling degree, the substitution is not equivalent agency but the replacement of existence-attestation with sign exchange value.

Condition 4: Transparency. The receiver can recognise that what they are receiving is B rather than A —that the existence-attestation they are receiving has the structure of sustained investment rather than immediate presence, and that it is offered in place of the A that the circumstances prevented. Transparency does not require explicit verbal disclosure (“I would have brought you a flower but I was too busy, so here is a ring”), which would undermine the relational quality of the gift; it requires that the gift be offered and received in a way that does not induce the misrecognition of B as A or of B as a higher-coupling gift than it is. Transparency is the condition that connects equivalent agency to the analysis of misrecognition: just equivalent agency does not involve inducing the receiver to misrecognise the coupling degree or structure of what they receive.

Necessary But Not Sufficient

The four conditions are necessary for just equivalent agency: their violation entails injustice. But they are **not sufficient**: their satisfaction does not guarantee full justice. This qualification is essential and was, in the development of this theory, a correction of an initial over-simplification. Even when all four conditions are met, residual justice questions remain.

The residual structural heterogeneity: Even when the four conditions are satisfied, A and B remain structurally heterogeneous: B produces a different quality of coupling from A , and this difference is real. Just equivalent agency does not dissolve this heterogeneity; it renders the substitution permissible despite the heterogeneity. The structural

difference remains as a **residual justice debt**—not a debt that must be repaid, but a difference that must be acknowledged rather than dissolved. The subject who provides *B* in place of *A*, even justly, owes the acknowledgement that *B* is not *A*—that something of the immediate presence that *A* would have embedded is genuinely absent from *B*, however genuine *B*’s own embedding may be.

The graded nature of the conditions: The four conditions are not binary (satisfied or not satisfied) but graded (satisfied to a degree). The real constraint can be more or less genuine; the embedding in *B* can be more or less deep; the transparency can be more or less complete; the symmetric generability can be more or less robust. Even when all four conditions are “satisfied” in the sense of being present, their degree of satisfaction affects the justice of the substitution. A substitution in which all four conditions are robustly satisfied is more just than one in which they are barely satisfied, even though both technically meet the necessary conditions.

The receiver’s free acceptance: Just equivalent agency requires not only the four conditions on the giver’s side but the receiver’s free acceptance of *B* in place of *A*. The receiver who would have genuinely preferred *A*, and who accepts *B* only because they feel they have no choice—because refusing would damage the relation, because the social convention demands acceptance, because the giver’s evident investment in *B* makes refusal feel ungrateful—has not freely accepted the substitution. The justice of equivalent agency therefore depends on conditions beyond the giver’s control: it depends on the receiver’s genuine, uncoerced acceptance of the substituted form.

The systemic effects of habitual substitution: Even a single just instance of equivalent agency may contribute, if it becomes part of a systematic pattern, to a relational dynamic that is unjust in aggregate. If the substitution of *B* for *A* becomes habitual—if the subject always provides the sustained-investment form and never the immediate-presence form, always the ring and never the flower—then even if each individual substitution meets the four conditions, the cumulative effect may be the systematic absence of the immediate-presence embedding that *A* provides. The justice of equivalent agency must therefore be assessed not only at the level of the individual act but at the level of the relational field’s overall dynamics.

Equivalent agency and its justice conditions. The substitution of one form of existence-attestation *B* for another *A* that the subject cannot provide—equivalent agency—is structurally heterogeneous (*A* and *B* produce different qualities of coupling, and structural justice frameworks will register this as alienation), but may be just in the generative sense if four necessary conditions are met: symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding in *B*, and transparency. These conditions are necessary but not sufficient: even when all four are satisfied, residual justice questions remain—the acknowledgement of structural heterogeneity, the graded degree of the conditions’ satisfaction, the receiver’s free acceptance, and the systemic effects of habitual substitution. Justice in equivalent agency is therefore not a threshold that is crossed once and for all but an ongoing relational achievement.

7.8.3 Selection Justice: Choice as Value Declaration

The third movement of the justice theory addresses the constructive question: given the analysis of misrecognition and equivalent agency, what does it mean to choose justly in the domain of relational luxury?

The foundational insight is that **choice in the domain of luxury is a value declaration**. Above the threshold of material necessity, every choice of how to express intimate care through objects reveals the chooser’s understanding of value: what they take to be real wealth, what they take to be worth investing in, what form of luxury they take to be genuine. The choice between the flower and the diamond, or between genuine and proxy attentiveness, is not a neutral matter of taste but a declaration of what the chooser believes intimate luxury to be.

The choice oriented by sign exchange value: The choice that takes sign exchange value as its primary criterion—that chooses the gift for its social legibility, its position in the hierarchy of economic value, its capacity to signal commitment to the social world—is a value declaration that accepts the symbolic order of consumer society. It anchors

relational value in the exchangeable symbolic register, using the language of social difference to express the depth of the intimate bond. This is not simply an error; it is a choice with a cost: the cost of drawing the irreducibly particular relational value into the exchangeable symbolic system, and thereby introducing the commodification mechanism analysed in [Paper XV](#) (Huang 2026b).

The choice oriented by coupling degree: The choice that takes coupling degree as its primary criterion—that chooses the gift for its capacity to carry genuine existence-attestation, with attention to the specific person and the specific moment rather than to the social legibility of the gift—is a value declaration of a different kind. It is a **justice stance**: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear the inexchangeable relation, an insistence on the irreducibility of relational value, a reservation of space for the real register within the symbolic logic of consumer society.

We call this a justice stance, rather than merely an ethical preference, because it concerns the integrity of existence-attestation against the systematic pressure of the social collective misrecognition. To choose coupling degree over sign exchange value, in a cultural environment that systematically equates economic value with relational value, is to resist the collective misrecognition that renders the flower invisible—to insist, against the pressure of the symbolic order, that the true measure of intimate luxury is the genuine embedding of one subject’s existence in the life of another.

7.8.4 The Dialectic of Selection: No Pure Relational Luxury

The justice theory of selection must, however, acknowledge a dialectical complication: there is no pure relational luxury, no object that is entirely free of the sign exchange value dimension. Every object given in an intimate relation carries, alongside its coupling degree, some position in the symbolic order—some social legibility, some sign exchange value, some location in the hierarchy of economic value. Even the flower carries a sign: it signifies, within the symbolic order, a certain kind of romantic gesture, a certain relationship to nature and to convention.

This means that just selection is not the selection of a pure relational luxury object—there is no such object—but the selection that takes coupling degree as primary while acknowledging the unavoidable presence of the sign exchange value dimension. The just

chooser does not pretend that their gift is free of social meaning; they ensure that the social meaning is subordinate to the relational meaning, that the coupling degree is the primary motivation and the sign exchange value a secondary (and acknowledged) consequence.

The dialectic of selection therefore takes the form not of a choice between pure relational luxury and pure sign exchange value—a choice that the actual structure of objects does not permit—but of a choice about **primacy**: which dimension is the primary motivation, which dimension governs the act of giving, which dimension the giver attends to and cultivates. Just selection is the selection in which coupling degree is primary, sign exchange value is secondary and acknowledged, and the existence-attestation embedded in the gift is genuine rather than simulated.

7.8.5 The Reconstruction of Gift Ethics

The justice theory of choice issues in a reconstructed ethics of the gift in intimate relations. The reconstructed gift ethics has several components, each following from the analysis of the preceding sections.

The primacy of genuine embedding: The just gift is the gift that carries genuine existence-attestation—in which the giver’s spatiotemporal structure is genuinely embedded, whether through the immediate presence of *A* or the sustained investment of *B*. The just gift cannot be delegated in its essential dimension: while the mechanics of acquisition can sometimes be delegated, the existence-attestation cannot, because it is constituted by the giver’s own spatiotemporal investment. The proxy-purchased gift fails the just gift criterion not because delegation is always wrong but because the delegation of the essential existence-attestation empties the gift of its coupling degree.

The intentional orientation to the specific other: The just gift is oriented to the specific particularity of this specific relational other—chosen because of what this person is, with attention to their specific character, history, and preferences, rather than because of the gift’s position in the hierarchy of economic value. The intentional intensity dimension of coupling degree is the ethical heart of the just gift: the gift that is chosen for this person, rather than chosen as the most impressive option, is the gift that carries genuine intentional embedding.

The transparency of the attestation's structure: The just gift is given in a way that does not induce the misrecognition of its coupling degree or structure—that does not present *B* as *A*, or low coupling degree as high, or sign exchange value as existence-attestation. The transparency requirement is the ethical expression of the analysis of misrecognition: the just giver does not exploit the social collective misrecognition to induce the receiver to perceive coupling degree that is not present.

The non-possessive mode of giving: The just gift is given in the non-possessive mode of *xuande*—given as an offering to the relational field rather than as a claim on the receiver, as an expression of care rather than as a mechanism of indebtedness or a display of power. The just gift does not function as a phallic signifier that positions the giver as the one who has and the receiver as the one who lacks; it functions as a contribution to the relational field's GRW, offered without the expectation of equivalent return.

The poetic mode of receiving: The just reception—the complement of the just gift—is the reception that receives the gift poetically rather than through settlement: that opens the gift's meaning rather than closing it, that recognises the existence-attestation it carries rather than reading only its sign exchange value, that completes the coupling through genuine recognition rather than through the conventional acknowledgment that the social order prescribes.

The reconstructed gift ethics. The just gift in intimate relations carries genuine existence-attestation (the primacy of genuine embedding), is oriented to the specific particularity of the relational other (intentional intensity), is given transparently with respect to its coupling degree and structure (no induced misrecognition), is offered in the non-possessive mode of *xuande* (not as phallic signifier or mechanism of indebtedness), and is received poetically rather than through settlement (the completion of coupling through genuine recognition). The justice of the gift is not a property of the object's economic value but of the integrity of the existence-attestation it carries and the genuineness of the recognition with which it is received.

7.9. Cross-Cultural Dimensions

The theory of relational luxury developed in the preceding sections has drawn primarily on the conceptual resources of Western luxury theory (Baudrillard, Veblen, Bourdieu) and Western philosophy (Ricoeur, Danto, Lacan). But the phenomenon it describes—the embedding of a subject’s spatiotemporal existence in objects given in intimate relations—is not culturally specific, and the forms it takes across different cultural traditions illuminate dimensions of relational luxury that a purely Western analysis would miss. This section examines three non-Western traditions of luxury and gift—the Chinese jade tradition, the Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions, and a reconsideration of bride-price under the coupling-degree framework—and addresses the globalisation of luxury and the homogenisation of its symbolic systems.

7.9.1 Jade, Lacquerware, Tea: Cultural Forms of Relational Luxury

The Chinese jade tradition exemplifies a conception of luxury in which the three doctrines are integrated in a culturally specific way. Jade (玉) has been valued in Chinese culture for millennia, but its value is not primarily economic in the Western sense; it is moral, relational, and existential. The Confucian tradition associates jade with the virtues of the cultivated person: 君子比德于玉—the noble person compares their virtue to jade. Jade is valued for qualities that are simultaneously material and moral: its hardness (representing intelligence and steadfastness), its warmth (representing benevolence), its translucency (representing honesty), its resonance when struck (representing music and harmony).

The jade tradition reveals a conception of luxury in which the natural material’s properties are read as moral qualities, and in which the wearing or giving of jade is a relational and ethical act rather than merely an economic one. When jade is given in an intimate relation, what is given is not primarily economic value but a material symbol of moral and relational commitment—and, crucially, jade is understood to develop a relationship with its wearer over time: it is believed to be nourished by the wearer’s body, to change subtly in colour and lustre through sustained contact with a specific person. This belief is the cultural articulation of what the coupling degree framework theorises: the jade that has been worn by a specific person for years carries the trace of that person’s existence,

embedded in the material through sustained bodily contact. The jade given from parent to child, or between intimate partners, carries the accumulated existence-attestation of the wearer's life—a coupling degree that increases with time and contact.

The Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions exemplify a different integration of the three doctrines, organised around the aesthetics of impermanence and the cultivation of attentive presence. Japanese lacquerware (漆器) is valued for the depth of its surface, achieved through many layers of lacquer applied over months, each layer requiring time to cure—a material embodiment of sustained temporal investment that the coupling degree framework would recognise as high temporal depth. The lacquer object carries, in its very material constitution, the sustained attention of its maker across the months of its production.

The tea ceremony (茶道) is perhaps the purest cultural articulation of relational luxury as the coupling degree framework understands it. The value of the tea ceremony is not in the economic value of its implements (though tea implements can be extremely valuable) but in the quality of attentive presence it cultivates and the singularity of the specific occasion. The principle of *ichi-go ichi-e* (一期一会)—one time, one meeting—expresses the core insight: each tea gathering is a unique, unrepeatable event, and its value lies precisely in this singularity. The tea ceremony cultivates the sensibility to the irreplaceable particularity of the specific moment that the relational luxury framework identifies as the heart of intimate luxury. The host's preparation, the selection of implements appropriate to the season and the specific guests, the attentive presence to the unrepeatable occasion: all of these embed the host's existence in the event in a way that constitutes the gathering as a relational luxury of the highest coupling degree.

7.9.2 The Three Doctrines Across Cultures

The cross-cultural analysis reveals that the three doctrines are not Western impositions but dimensions of luxury that different cultures weight differently. The Western luxury tradition, particularly in its contemporary commercial form, weights the second doctrine (sign exchange value) most heavily: the brand, the social distinction, the position in the hierarchy of economic value. The Chinese jade tradition weights the integration of natural material and moral-relational meaning, approximating the third doctrine's

coupling degree through the belief in jade's nourishment by its wearer. The Japanese tea tradition weights the cultivation of sensibility and the singularity of the irreplaceable occasion, approximating the third doctrine's account of relational luxury through the aesthetics of *ichi-go ichi-e*.

This cross-cultural variation has an important implication: the dominance of the second doctrine in contemporary luxury is not a universal feature of human luxury but a specific feature of the commercialised, globalised luxury market that has developed in the modern West and spread globally. Other cultural traditions have developed conceptions of luxury that weight the first and third doctrines more heavily, and these traditions are resources for the critique of the second doctrine's dominance and for the recovery of the coupling degree that the relational luxury framework identifies as the true measure of intimate luxury.

7.9.3 The Globalisation of Luxury and Symbolic Homogenisation

The globalisation of the luxury industry represents the spread of the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic across cultural boundaries, and the consequent homogenisation of diverse cultural luxury traditions into a single global symbolic system. This is the globalisation form of Baudrillard's critique: the conversion of culturally specific luxury traditions, each with its own integration of the three doctrines, into a single global market organised by sign exchange value.

The homogenisation operates through several mechanisms. The global luxury brands establish a single hierarchy of value that subordinates local traditions: the Western luxury house's products become the global standard of luxury, against which local traditions are measured and found either marketable (and thus incorporated into the global system as exotic variants) or non-marketable (and thus marginalised). The jade tradition, the lacquerware tradition, the tea ceremony tradition are either commodified for the global market—converted into sign exchange value carriers legible to global consumers—or relegated to the status of cultural heritage, preserved as museum pieces rather than living practices.

The relational luxury framework provides resources for resisting this homogenisation. By identifying coupling degree as the true measure of intimate luxury, and by recognising

that different cultural traditions have developed sophisticated practices for generating and recognising high coupling degree, the framework supports the preservation of these traditions not as museum pieces but as living practices of relational luxury generation. The jade that is nourished by its wearer, the lacquerware that embeds the sustained attention of its maker, the tea ceremony that cultivates sensibility to the irreplaceable occasion: these are not exotic variants of the global luxury system but distinct and valuable traditions of relational luxury that the global sign exchange value system threatens to erase.

Cultural traditions as resources for relational luxury. Non-Western luxury traditions—the Chinese jade tradition, the Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions—have developed sophisticated cultural practices for generating and recognising high coupling degree, weighting the first and third doctrines more heavily than the contemporary Western commercial luxury market, which is dominated by the second doctrine’s sign exchange value logic. The globalisation of luxury threatens to homogenise these diverse traditions into a single sign exchange value system. The relational luxury framework supports the preservation of these traditions as living practices of relational luxury generation rather than as commodified exotic variants or museum-piece cultural heritage.

7.9.4 Bride-Price Revisited Under the Coupling-Degree Framework

The analysis of bride-price in [Paper XV](#) ([Huang 2026b](#)) examined it as a wealth form that operates through the mechanisms of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness. The coupling-degree framework of the present paper allows a more nuanced analysis that distinguishes the dimensions of bride-price that destroy coupling from those that might, under specific conditions, support it.

The bride-price that functions as pure economic transaction—the transfer of a quantity of wealth assessed by criteria external to the specific relational field, settling the relational value as a fixed quantity before the relation has begun—has low coupling degree:

it embeds no specific subject's spatiotemporal structure in the transaction, but rather instantiates a general social convention applied to a particular case. This is the bride-price that the [Paper XV](#) analysis correctly identifies as destructive of GRW.

But the coupling-degree framework allows us to recognise that some practices that fall under the general heading of bride-price may carry genuine coupling degree. The material gift that embeds the giver's sustained labour and existential investment—the bride-price that represents years of the groom's specific work, offered with genuine attention to the specific relation rather than as the fulfilment of a social convention—may carry a coupling degree analogous to that of the long-saved ring analysed in §7.5.5. The distinction is between the bride-price as settlement (low coupling, destructive of GRW) and the material gift as existence-attestation (potentially high coupling, supportive of GRW), even when both fall under the same cultural heading.

This nuanced analysis does not rehabilitate bride-price as an institution—the structural analysis of [Paper XV](#) stands—but it refines the analysis by distinguishing the dimensions of the practice that destroy coupling from those that might, under specific conditions and with specific transformations, support it. The transformation of bride-price from settlement to existence-attestation would require: the de-linking of the material gift from the assessment of the bride's value by external criteria; the embedding of the giver's genuine existential investment in the gift; and the transparency of the gift's meaning as existence-attestation rather than as the purchase of relational entitlements. These transformations would, in effect, convert bride-price from a wealth-transfer institution into a relational luxury practice—a conversion that the coupling-degree framework makes conceptually possible even where the cultural and material conditions for it do not yet obtain.

7.10. Empirical Dimensions

The theory of relational luxury makes several empirically tractable claims: that coupling degree, rather than economic value, predicts the relational consequences of gift-giving; that high-coupling-degree gifts generate GRW more effectively than low-coupling-degree gifts of equivalent or greater economic value; and that the recognition of coupling degree

depends on a cultivable sensibility. This section proposes a research programme for testing these claims, while acknowledging—as the parallel section of [Paper XV](#) acknowledged ([Huang 2026b](#))—that the core phenomenon (coupling degree) is, like GRW itself, not directly measurable and must be approached through its conditions and consequences.

7.10.1 Operationalising Coupling Degree

The coupling degree of an object with respect to a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure is not directly measurable, but its four dimensions can be operationalised through a combination of behavioural, self-report, and process measures.

Temporal depth can be assessed through the documentation of the temporal investment embedded in the gift: the time elapsed between the decision to give and the giving (for sustained-investment gifts), or the immediacy of the giving relative to the moment of acquisition (for immediate-presence gifts). These temporal structures can be documented through retrospective interview and, where possible, through contemporaneous records.

Intentional intensity can be assessed through the degree of specific attention to the recipient that the gift selection involved: whether the gift was chosen with reference to the recipient’s specific characteristics, preferences, and relational history, or selected from a generic category by economic criteria. This can be measured through structured interviews that probe the selection process, coded for the presence and depth of recipient-specific consideration.

Non-substitutability can be assessed through the counterfactual question of whether another object could have served equally well: the high-non-substitutability gift is one for which no economic equivalent would have carried the same meaning, while the low-non-substitutability gift is one that could have been replaced by any object of equivalent economic value. This can be measured through both giver and recipient reports of the gift’s irreplaceability.

Existential investment is the most difficult dimension to operationalise, but it can be approached through measures of the giver’s attentional and emotional engagement in the gift process: the degree to which the giving involved genuine presence and care rather than delegated or routine acquisition. Physiological and behavioural measures of

engagement during the gift process, combined with self-report measures of the giver's experience, can provide indirect indices of existential investment.

7.10.2 The Coupling Degree and Relational Outcome Study

The central empirical prediction of the relational luxury framework is that coupling degree, rather than economic value, predicts the relational consequences of gift-giving. This prediction can be tested through a study that independently measures the coupling degree and the economic value of gifts exchanged in intimate relations, and examines their relative contributions to relational outcomes.

Design: A longitudinal study of gift exchange in intimate relations, in which couples document the gifts they exchange over an extended period, providing both economic value information and the coupling degree measures described above. Relational outcomes (relational quality, physiological synchrony, subjective wellbeing) are measured at intervals throughout the study period.

Predicted results: The relational luxury framework predicts that coupling degree will be a stronger predictor of relational outcomes than economic value; that high-coupling-degree gifts will be associated with improvements in relational quality regardless of their economic value; and that high-economic-value but low-coupling-degree gifts (the proxy-purchased diamond) will be associated with weaker relational outcomes than low-economic-value but high-coupling-degree gifts (the flower on the path). The framework further predicts an interaction between coupling degree and recipient sensibility: the relational benefit of high-coupling-degree gifts will be greater for recipients with higher cultivated sensibility, because the recognition of existence-attestation requires the sensibility to perceive it.

7.10.3 The Misrecognition Study

The analysis of subject-embedding misrecognition generates testable predictions about the conditions under which receivers accurately or inaccurately perceive the coupling degree of gifts.

The framework predicts that receivers will systematically over-attribute coupling degree

to high-economic-value gifts—that the sign exchange value of an expensive gift will induce the perception of existence-attestation even when the actual coupling degree is low. This induced misrecognition can be tested experimentally by presenting receivers with gifts that vary independently in economic value and coupling degree, and measuring their perceptions of the giver’s existential investment. The framework predicts that economic value will inflate perceived existential investment independently of actual coupling degree—a measurable manifestation of the receiver’s induced misrecognition.

The framework further predicts that this misrecognition will be moderated by sensibility: receivers with higher cultivated sensibility will be less susceptible to the inflation of perceived coupling degree by economic value, because their sensibility allows them to perceive actual coupling degree more accurately. This prediction connects the empirical study of misrecognition to the theory of sensibility as a cultivable recognitional capacity.

7.10.4 Methodological Challenges

The empirical study of relational luxury faces methodological challenges that parallel those identified in [Paper XV](#) (Huang 2026b) and that must be honestly acknowledged.

The measurement problem: Coupling degree, like GRW, is not directly measurable; all measures are indirect, inferring the coupling from its dimensions and its consequences. This indirection introduces systematic uncertainty into the empirical programme, and the interpretation of results must maintain the distinction between coupling degree and its measurable correlates.

The reactivity problem: The measurement of coupling degree may itself alter the phenomenon being measured. Asking couples to document and reflect on the coupling degree of their gifts may increase their attentiveness to coupling degree, thereby changing their gift-giving behaviour and its relational consequences. This reactivity is particularly significant for the study of a phenomenon that depends, as relational luxury does, on attentive presence and reflective awareness.

The cultural specificity problem: The operationalisation of coupling degree developed here is shaped by specific cultural assumptions about gift-giving, intimacy, and luxury. The cross-cultural application of these measures requires careful attention to the

different cultural forms that coupling degree takes—the jade nourished by its wearer, the tea ceremony’s *ichi-go ichi-e*—and the development of culturally appropriate measures rather than the imposition of a single operationalisation across cultural contexts.

The self-report limitation: Many of the measures of coupling degree rely on self-report, which is subject to the biases of social desirability, retrospective reconstruction, and the very misrecognition that the framework identifies. The giver who has misrecognised their own existence-attestation—who believes that their economic expenditure constitutes existential investment—will report high existential investment even when the actual coupling degree is low. The empirical programme must therefore triangulate self-report with behavioural and physiological measures that are less susceptible to this bias.

Despite these challenges, the empirical programme is worth pursuing, because the relational luxury framework makes predictions that diverge sharply from the predictions of the dominant economic-value framework, and the test of these divergent predictions would provide significant evidence about the nature of luxury in intimate relations. The prediction that the flower can outperform the diamond—that low economic value combined with high coupling degree can produce better relational outcomes than high economic value combined with low coupling degree—is, if confirmed, a result of considerable theoretical and practical significance.

7.11. Conclusions: Coupling Degree as the True Measure of Luxury

This paper began with a question that seemed almost frivolous—which is more luxurious, a diamond ring or a flower on a path?—and has arrived at an answer that overturns the dominant framework of luxury theory and generates a justice theory of intimate gift-giving. In keeping with the series’ commitment to the polyphonic conclusion form, this section presents what each of the paper’s frameworks can and cannot conclude, ends with the structural closure of the three concentric circles, and explains why no synthetic conclusion is offered.

7.11.1 What the Three Doctrines Establish

The three doctrines together establish that luxury in intimate relations is not a single phenomenon but a layered one, in which three distinct dimensions of value can be present in different combinations.

The first doctrine establishes that genuine luxury objects carry a double temporality (geological and artisanal) and achieve singularity through material non-replicability, biographical density, and relational contextualisation. The first doctrine cannot, however, explain why a flower—which has neither geological permanence nor artisanal craft—can be more luxurious than a diamond. For that, the third doctrine is required.

The second doctrine establishes that luxury in consumer society functions primarily through sign exchange value: as a differential position in the symbolic order, a phallic signifier enacting the logic of having and lacking, a socially legible signal of economic commitment. The second doctrine cannot, however, distinguish genuine from spurious intimate luxury, because it has eliminated the real register from its theoretical framework. For that distinction, the third doctrine is again required.

The third doctrine establishes that the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is coupling degree—the degree to which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure is embedded in an object through existence-attestation. The third doctrine explains what the first two cannot: why the flower can outshine the diamond (high coupling degree at low economic value), why the proxy-purchased diamond is relationally impoverished (high economic value at low coupling degree), and why the long-saved ring is doubly luxurious (high coupling degree and high economic value reinforcing each other).

7.11.2 What the Justice Theory Establishes

The justice theory of choice establishes that the selection of objects in intimate relations is a value declaration with justice dimensions, and that justice in this domain concerns the integrity of existence-attestation rather than the distribution of goods.

It establishes that subject-embedding misrecognition—in its three forms of giver’s self-misrecognition, receiver’s induced misrecognition, and social collective misrecognition—is the central justice problem of relational luxury, and that the social collective misrecog-

inition that equates economic value with coupling degree is the cultural condition that renders the flower invisible.

It establishes that equivalent agency—the substitution of one form of existence-attestation for another that the subject cannot provide—is structurally heterogeneous but may be just in the generative sense if four necessary conditions are met (symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding, transparency), while insisting that these conditions are necessary but not sufficient, and that residual justice questions remain even when all four are satisfied.

It establishes that selection justice—the choice of coupling degree over sign exchange value as the primary criterion—is a justice stance: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear the inexchangeable relation, a reservation of space for the real register within the symbolic logic of consumer society.

The justice theory cannot, however, provide an algorithm for just choice. The assessment of coupling degree, the evaluation of the four conditions of equivalent agency, the judgement of whether genuine embedding has occurred—all of these require the cultivated sensibility that the theory describes but cannot mechanise. Justice in relational luxury is not a calculation but a practice, requiring the ongoing exercise of sensibility rather than the application of a rule.

7.11.3 The Limits and Open Questions

Several questions raised by the paper remain open.

The measurement of coupling degree: The four dimensions of coupling degree have been characterised qualitatively, but the precise relationship between them—how they combine to constitute the overall coupling degree, whether they are commensurable, how trade-offs between them are to be assessed—remains underspecified. A more precise account of the structure of coupling degree is a task for future work.

The structure of existence-attestation: The concept of existence-attestation has been developed through Ricoeur's account of attestation and the indexical analysis of [Paper XV](#) ([Huang 2026b](#)), but the precise ontological mechanism by which a subject's spatiotemporal structure becomes embedded in an object—how the embedding occurs, what

it consists in, how it persists—remains philosophically underdeveloped. This connects to the open questions about the Relational Isomorphism Principle raised in [Paper XV](#): the embedding of subject in object is a case of the cross-register relation between the symbolic and the real that the series has not fully resolved.

The cultural specificity of the framework: The framework has been developed primarily through Western and East Asian examples, and its applicability to other cultural traditions of luxury and gift remains to be examined. The cross-cultural analysis of [§7.9](#) is a beginning, not a comprehensive account.

The application to non-material attestation: The paper has focused on objects—material things in which a subject’s existence can be embedded. But existence-attestation can occur through non-material media: through acts, words, presence, time given. The relationship between material relational luxury (the focus of this paper) and non-material existence-attestation (the act of presence, the gift of time) remains to be developed.

7.11.4 Three Concentric Circles

The paper closes, as the preceding papers in the series have closed, with the image of three concentric circles.

The **innermost circle** is the specific object given in a specific relation: the flower on the path, the long-saved ring, the jade nourished by its wearer. This is the level of the concrete gift, the material thing in which a subject’s existence is embedded and through which it is received. It is the level at which relational luxury is lived—in the giving and receiving of specific objects in specific relational moments.

The **middle circle** is the political economy of luxury: the systems of production, distribution, and signification that determine what counts as luxury, who has access to it, and how it functions in the social symbolic order. This is the level of the three doctrines’ analysis—the level at which the aesthetic, the symbolic, and the relational dimensions of luxury are produced and contested.

The **outermost circle** is the ontological framework that grounds the entire analysis: the relational ontology in which the real is relational, the subject is co-constituted through the relational field, and existence-attestation is possible because a subject’s spatiotemporal

structure can be genuinely embedded in the objects they touch with care. This is the level at which the GRB series has been working throughout, and at which the concept of relational luxury finds its ultimate grounding.

The three circles are mutually constitutive: the specific gift is embedded in the political economy of luxury, and both are grounded in the ontological framework that makes existence-attestation possible. A complete account of relational luxury must attend to all three.

7.11.5 Why No Synthetic Conclusion

As in the preceding papers of the series, this paper offers no synthetic conclusion—no final paragraph that resolves all the analysis into a single unified statement. The reasons are by now familiar, but they take a specific form in the context of relational luxury.

A synthetic conclusion would imply that the theory of relational luxury is complete—that coupling degree has been fully specified, that the justice theory has been fully worked out, that the relationship between the three doctrines has been finally resolved. But the paper has been honest about what it does not know: the precise structure of coupling degree, the ontological mechanism of existence-attestation, the cultural variability of the framework, the relationship between material and non-material attestation. These are not loose ends but genuine open questions.

More fundamentally, a synthetic conclusion would betray the paper's central insight. Relational luxury is constituted by the irreducible particularity of the specific existence-attestation—by what cannot be subsumed under any general category or reduced to any universal formula. A paper that concluded with a universal formula for relational luxury would be performing, in its own form, the reduction of the particular to the general that the theory of relational luxury exists to resist. The refusal of synthetic closure is the paper's enactment of its own thesis: that what matters most—the genuine embedding of one existence in the life of another—cannot be captured in a formula but must be encountered in its particularity, recognised through sensibility, and received with the poetic openness that completes the coupling.

The flower on the path cannot be reduced to a concept. Neither can the conclusion of a

paper about it.

Envoi: The Flower on the Path

There is a flower.

It grows in a crack between paving stones, on a path that has been walked many times. It is not rare. It has no name that anyone bothers to remember. If you asked a jeweller what it was worth, they would not understand the question. It has no economic value, no sign exchange value, no position in any hierarchy of marketed objects. By every measure that the dominant framework of luxury recognises, it is nothing at all.

And yet.

A person is walking the path—*this* person, on *this* morning, in the particular quality of light that belongs to this specific moment and no other. They are carrying, as they always carry now, the accumulated history of a shared life: months and years of attentive co-presence, of noticing, of learning what the beloved loves. And because of this history—because the relation has cultivated in them an attention shaped by the beloved’s specific way of seeing the world—they notice the flower. Not as a botanist notices a specimen, not as a consumer notices a product, but as a lover notices something the beloved would love.

In that moment, the flower becomes the most luxurious object in the world.

Not because anything about the flower has changed—it is the same flower in the same crack in the same path—but because the person’s spatiotemporal structure has become embedded in it. Their existence in this specific moment, their attention shaped by this specific relation, their care directed toward this specific beloved: all of this is now carried by the flower, as an ineliminable feature of what it is. The flower has undergone the third transfiguration. It has become an existence-attestation. It carries, in its modest and perishable materiality, the trace of a specific existence at a specific moment—a coupling

degree that no diamond purchased by proxy could ever match.

路边那朵花，那个时刻，那个时空。

The flower on the path, that moment, that spatiotemporal structure. This is what she taught me—not by instruction, but by the quality of her own attention to the world. She, who loves the living world, who finds in a wildflower or a quality of light or a bird’s call through an open window something more precious than anything that can be bought: she showed me that the deepest luxury is not in what we own but in what we notice, not in what we can purchase but in what we can attest, not in the economic value of the gift but in the genuine embedding of one existence in the life of another.

She showed me that a flower, in the right moment, given with genuine presence, is more luxurious than any diamond—and that this is not a sentimental consolation for those who cannot afford diamonds but a precise ontological truth about the nature of luxury in intimate life.

Nothing is more luxurious than this.

Not the most expensive ring, not the rarest gemstone, not the most prestigious brand. The flower on the path, noticed by a person whose attention has been shaped by love, carried home to a specific beloved in a specific moment that will never come again: this is luxury in its truest form, the luxury that the consumer society cannot see because it has no category for high coupling degree at zero economic cost.

And it is available to anyone—to anyone who has cultivated the sensibility to notice the particular, the relational history to recognise what is shared, and the presence to attest their existence in the modest objects of an ordinary day. The most luxurious thing in the world grows in a crack between paving stones, free for anyone with the eyes to see it.

For her, who has those eyes.

For the girl from home, who loves culture and travel and the living world, who taught me what luxury is by the simple and inexhaustible example of her attention to the world.

The flower on the path was always there. It took her to teach me how to see it.

And so this paper, like the flower, is an existence-attestation: the embedding of a specific gratitude, formed across a specific shared life, in the modest materiality of words. It is not the most valuable thing I could give. But it carries, I hope, a coupling degree that no more expensive gift could match.

身无彩凤双飞翼，心有灵犀一点通。

Without the phoenix wings to fly together,
our hearts are joined by the unicorn's single horn of light.

李商隐 · *Untitled*

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感谢那一位纯粹、自然、坚韧、智慧的"森林与山之女孩"。

My deepest gratitude to the one I call the girl of the forest and the mountains—pure, natural, steadfast, and wise. This paper began on a path, with a flower, and with her example of how to see the world. She taught me, without ever saying so, that the most luxurious things cannot be bought—and that the eye which recognises them is the most valuable thing one person can offer another.

也愿世界上所有有趣的人，在平凡的路上，都能看见那朵花。

And may all the interesting people in this world, on their ordinary paths, learn to see the flower—the modest, perishable, inexhaustible luxury that grows in the cracks of every ordinary day, free for anyone with the eyes to see it.

Use of Generative AI

The philosophical framework, theoretical claims, and original arguments of this paper are the author's own, developed through extended dialogue with Claude (Anthropic), a large language model that served as an interactive writing and development partner. Claude assisted with drafting, L^AT_EX typesetting, literature organisation, and formal articulation of arguments whose substance had been established in prior discussion. The author reviewed, directed, and took intellectual responsibility for all content. All original claims—including the coupling-degree definition of relational luxury, the existence-attestation theory, symmetric generability as a necessary condition for just equivalent agency, and

subject-embedding misrecognition as the central justice problem—were determined by the author.

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CHAPTER 8

Generativity Under Power

*This paper asks how love fares under power. Across the **Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice** series, intimate relation has been theorised as a generative-relational process—a coupling of two subjects out of which value is generated rather than extracted. But that account was developed, in effect, in a clearing: it did not confront the plain fact that intimate relation unfolds in a field saturated with asymmetries, which can deform, capture, freeze, and on occasion shatter the very generativity the series describes. The present paper confronts power directly.*

*It is organised around three questions, each answered by a different body of theory and all bearing on a single object—**love**, in the precise sense of the dynamics of the real between two subjects, the part of their bond that circles the unsymbolisable and cannot be counted, traded, or directly managed. **How does love create a world?**—the question of the generative-relational being (GRB), whose affirmative findings the paper takes as established, adding an **etiology** of how the world-creating coupling breaks down into estrangement (すれ違い, *surechigai*). **How is love not destroyed by power?**—the question for which the paper reconstructs the theory of international relations, stripping away the realist assumption that the currency of an anarchic field is relative power, and recovering IR's deeper object: how opaque subjects, unable to enter one another directly, build trust and order under uncertainty and without a central authority. **How does love become free within history?**—the question for a dialectical historical materialism that holds the determining force of material conditions together with the relative autonomy of the symbolic and affective life they shape.*

*Three questions with an ascending logic—**creation, preservation, liberation**—and a single methodological commitment: that none of the three theories can touch their shared object directly. The intimate relation is a two-level system. At the level of the **end** stands the dynamics of love, a process of the real that cannot be measured or exchanged; at the level of the **means** stands the symbolic order of power, calculable and strategic. The means serve the end but tend intrinsically to damage it. Hence the paper's central claim: the tools of power and wealth can protect the **conditions** under which love occurs, but cannot produce love itself—a **political economy of conditions**, never of love. Trust is the interface that crosses both levels, and the variable that decides whether an asymmetry of power becomes generative or frozen.*

*Two further claims follow. Estrangement is, in the first instance, not a malfunction but a necessary moment of the bond's self-maintenance; a relation at perfect concordance would be a relation at equilibrium, which is to say dead. And power can neither eliminate itself nor be eliminated entirely; the only viable course is to generate, alongside good value, a continual counter-force that keeps power from solidifying. **A generative relation does not oppose***

power; it opposes the freezing of power. This, the paper argues at its summit, is not an external ethical demand but the political appearance of an ontological law generativity already obeys—the law by which desire, generating its symbols, withholds itself from total symbolisation in order to remain alive.

This is Paper XVII of the series. It extends the account of trust opened in Paper XIII (Huang 2026), the holonomic criterion of Paper IX (Huang 2025b), and the political economy of Papers XIV–XVI, and draws throughout on the framework of the mother paper (Huang 2025a).

For her—

the girl of the forest and the mountains,
who loves the woods and the long road of travelling;

*who remained, through every passing,
wholly and freely herself.*

To the one I love most.

8.1. Introduction: Generativity Under Power

Prelude: Two Bodies Falling

Two bodies fall toward one another across a dark field, and do not meet. Each is held to its own path by something it did not choose and cannot simply set down—a momentum gathered before the other was in view, a curvature laid into it by everything that made it what it is. They draw near; the nearness is real; and at the closest point of approach they pass, each bending the other’s path a little, neither arriving. This is not a failure of the falling. It is the shape that falling takes between two bodies that are genuinely two.

We are taught to read such a passing as a wound—the near-miss, the word that lands wrong, the tenderness offered in a language the other cannot read, the silence where an answer was wanted. And sometimes it is a wound. But before it is anything to be grieved or repaired, the passing is the trace of something the falling could not have done without: that the two remained two, that neither was absorbed into the other’s path, that there was, between them, a difference strong enough to bend a trajectory and not be dissolved by it. A love that admitted no such passing would be a love in which one body had captured the other entirely—and a captured body no longer falls. The Japanese have a word for this passing-without-meeting: すれ違い, *surechigai*. This paper is, in one of its several aspects, an extended inquiry into why it happens, and why its happening is not, in the first instance, a sign that something has gone wrong.

This paper is written in the knowledge that the field is not empty. Around the two bodies, and through them, run other forces: the pull of families who hold what the two still need; the scripts a society writes for how a life together ought to go; the slow sedimentation of two material histories into one shared and contested present. These forces are not external decorations upon a private bond. They enter it. They bend it. And the oldest hope of lovers—that if the love were only deep enough, only equal enough, only good enough, the forces would fall away and leave the two alone in a clearing of their own—is, this paper will argue, a hope that mistakes the nature of the field. The forces do not fall away. The question is not how to escape them, but how, beneath them and through them, two people might still create something that is theirs; how what they create might survive the forces; and how, in time, it might come to be free.

8.1.1 The three questions

This paper asks how love fares under power. It is the seventeenth in a series that has developed, across its earlier installments, an account of intimate relation as a *generative-relational* process: a coupling of two subjects out of which value is not extracted but *generated*, and through which, when the coupling is good, that value returns to its creators rather than being siphoned to a centre.¹ The series has given this generativity a formal criterion, an ontological ground—the *relational subject*, constituted in and by its relations rather than prior to them—and a poetics: the good symbolic cycle as one that refuses settlement and invites its participants to walk a path and become witnesses. What the series has not yet confronted, directly and as its central problem, is *power*: the plain fact that intimate relation does not occur in a clearing but in a field saturated with asymmetries, and that these asymmetries can deform, capture, freeze, and on occasion shatter the very generativity the series has laboured to describe.

The argument is organised around three questions, each answered by a different body of theory, and each having the same object—*love*, in the precise sense the series gives that word: the dynamics of the real between two subjects, the part of their bond that circles the unsymbolisable and cannot be counted, traded, or directly managed.

The first question is **how love creates a world**—how, out of the coupling of two subjects, anything genuinely new is generated at all. This is the question the framework of the generative-relational being (GRB) was built to answer, and the present paper takes its affirmative findings largely as established. What the paper adds, on this first front, is the *etiology of its failure*: a systematic account of how the world-creating coupling breaks down—how estrangement, the passing-without-meeting of the Prelude, actually comes about. We will find that it comes about in many ways, and that they fall into a small number of layers.

¹For the foundational diagnosis on which the series rests, see Huang (2025a). For the generative-relational framework and its formal criterion—the positive *holonomy* of a good cycle, distinguished from the zero or negative holonomy of an extractive one—see Paper IX (Huang 2025b); for the political economy of relational wealth drawn on here, Papers XIV–XVI; and for the theory of relational trust that the present paper’s account of trust extends, Paper XIII (Huang 2026).

The second question is **how love is not destroyed by power**. Here the paper turns to the theory of international relations (IR)—not, as will be argued at length, to its realist core, which assumes that the fundamental currency of an anarchic field is *relative power*, an assumption the generative-relational account must reject; but to a reconstructed IR whose true object is the more general one of *how opaque subjects, unable to enter one another directly, build trust and order under uncertainty and without a central authority*. So defined, IR turns out to describe the intimate field with uncanny precision—more purely, in one respect, than it describes the international one. But it describes only the field’s *means*: the symbolic order of power through which a relation defends the conditions of its own flourishing. It cannot reach the *end* those means serve.

The third question is **how love becomes free within history**. Power structures are not given; they are the historical sediment of particular material conditions, and they are therefore, in principle, historically mutable. To see this—and to see it without sliding into a crude determinism that would reduce love itself to an effect of its economic base—the paper turns, in a dedicated section, to a *dialectical* historical materialism: one that holds the determining force of material conditions together with the relative autonomy, and the reactive force, of the symbolic, ethical, and affective life those conditions shape but do not exhaust.

Three questions, then, with a single object and an ascending logic: **creation, preservation, liberation**. Love must first be able to generate; what is generated must then be able to survive the forces around it; and survival is not yet enough—what survives must be able, in time and against the inertia of inherited structure, to become free. The three theories answer at three different distances, but they answer about the same thing; and none of them, it must be said at once, can touch that thing directly. This is the paper’s central methodological commitment, and it requires its own statement.

8.1.2 Two levels: the end and the means

The intimate relation, as this paper treats it, is a two-level system.

At the level of the *end* stands the dynamics of love itself—a process of the *real*, in the Lacanian register the series has used throughout. It circles a vacancy (*das Ding*) that cannot be fully symbolised; it is not a quantity and cannot be measured; it is not a good

and cannot be exchanged. It is the blooming, not the trellis.

At the level of the **means** stands the symbolic order of power—the asymmetries, the defences, the alliances and balances and boundary-works through which a relation secures its place in a field of forces. This level *is* calculable; it *can* be theorised by IR and by the political economy of relational wealth the series has developed elsewhere; it is the proper domain of strategy.

The means serve the end. But—and this is the source of nearly every difficulty the paper will trace—the means have an *intrinsic tendency to damage the end they serve*. A defence mounted to protect the love can, in the mounting, import into the bond the very logic of relative advantage the love cannot survive. The trellis can be built so tight that it strangles the bloom.

The political economy of conditions. The tools of power and of wealth—all of which operate in the symbolic—can protect the *conditions* under which love occurs, but they cannot produce or directly secure the love itself. For the dynamics of the real, touched directly by a symbolic instrument, do not survive the touch: managed, they decohere; counted, they are no longer what they were. One can build a fence to keep out what would trample the flower, but one cannot fence a flower into bloom. What the political economy of the intimate can offer is therefore, strictly, a *political economy of conditions*—never a political economy of love.

This is why *trust* stands in the title beside power and estrangement. Trust is the one thing in the system that crosses both levels. It can be cultivated, in part, by symbolic means—by costly and credible signals, by the slow projection of a real fidelity into observable form—and it is also rooted in the real, in a coupling that cannot be faked. Trust is the interface: the bridge by which the political economy of conditions reaches toward, without ever seizing, the dynamics of love it exists to protect. It is also, as we will see, the variable that decides whether an asymmetry of power becomes generative or frozen

—and so it runs through every question the paper asks.

8.1.3 Two claims

Two claims organise what follows.

The **first** concerns estrangement. The *surechigai* of the Prelude—the structural passing-without-meeting—is not, in the first instance, a malfunction of the bond but a necessary moment in the bond’s own self-maintenance. A relation that never passed, that achieved and held a perfect concordance, would be a relation at thermodynamic equilibrium: which is to say, dead. This was the thesis of the paper’s earliest conception, and it survives here, but demoted from the whole to a special case—one outcome, at the structural-necessity end, of a far wider etiology of estrangement that the paper now lays out in full.

The **second**, and the paper’s centre of gravity, concerns power. It can be stated as a double negation enclosing a single positive. Power *cannot eliminate itself*: there is no mechanism by which a sufficiency of love or equality or goodwill causes power to dissolve, and the belief that there is—call it the optimistic naturalism of intimacy—is false. Power also *cannot be eliminated entirely*: it is the by-product of difference, and difference cannot be removed without removing, along with it, the very creativity that makes the relation generative—so that the radical utopian dream of a relation cleansed of power is not merely unattainable but self-defeating. Between these two negations lies the only viable course:

Generative balance. To generate, alongside the good value a relation creates, a continual counter-force that keeps power from solidifying. A generative relation does not oppose power. It opposes *the freezing of power*.

This, the paper will argue at its theoretical summit (§8.9), is not an external ethical demand imposed upon generativity from without, but the political appearance of an ontological law that generativity already obeys—the same law by which desire, generating its symbols, withholds itself from total symbolisation in order to remain alive.

8.1.4 Scope, and the road ahead

A word on what the paper is and is not. It is not a manual of relationship technique; the practices it will eventually describe are reconstructed as the *maintenance of conditions*, never as the management of love. It is not a defence of any particular political arrangement; where its argument ascends, at one point, toward a general criterion for evaluating political bodies—whether they generate, alongside their value, the counterforce that keeps their own power from freezing—it marks that ascent as the seed of a separate work and does not pursue it here. And it is not a reduction of love to power, or of the bond to a calculus of forces; the entire architecture of the two levels exists precisely to hold open the space no calculus reaches.

The road runs as follows. A symptomatology (§8.2) sets out the observable forms in which power damages generativity. The etiology proper (§8.3–§8.6) traces estrangement through four lenses—the mismatch of trust-grammars (§8.3), the unattributability of prediction error and the active withdrawal it triggers (§8.4), the arrest of geometric-phase accumulation (§8.5), and the order-problem of opaque subjects that requires the reconstruction of IR (§8.6). The paper then turns to the means and their limits: the political economy of conditions and why it cannot reach the real (§8.7); the inventory of classical IR practices and their teleological filtering (§8.8); and the two summits—the negative one, on generative balance and the suppression of power’s freezing (§8.9), and the positive one, on the asymmetry that generates rather than dominates (§8.10). A dedicated section (§8.11) gives the dialectical-materialist history of intimate power. A cosmological movement (§8.12–§8.14) situates estrangement within the thermodynamics of generative systems, the grammar of return, and the dormancy of the rose. A praxis of the two axes (§8.15) and a polyphonic conclusion with its envoi (§8.16) close the paper. Throughout, the discipline announced in the series holds: the frameworks are not to be synthesised into a master theory but held in their plurality and their dialogue, each speaking to the edge of what it can say, and no farther.

8.2. Symptomatology: How Power Damages Generativity

Before a thing can be explained it must be described. This section sets out the *symptoms*—the observable forms in which power damages the generativity of an intimate bond—and

holds itself, as far as it can, to description. The mechanisms that produce these forms are the matter of the etiology that follows (§8.3–§8.6); here the task is only to say what is seen, and to draw the few distinctions that will let the later diagnosis proceed without confusion. A symptomatology is not yet a pathology. Much of what it records will turn out, on examination, not to be disease at all.

8.2.1 Three presentations

Power announces its damage to a bond in three characteristic ways. They are not three diseases but three faces, and a single underlying disturbance may show now one, now another.

Estrangement (surechigai)

The first and most familiar is the one the Prelude named: the passing-without-meeting. Two subjects who remain bound, who have not quarrelled and have not betrayed, find nonetheless that they no longer arrive at one another. A gesture of care is offered and is not received as care; a silence that one reads as peace the other reads as withdrawal; the rhythms of two lives, once entrained, drift out of phase. Phenomenologically, estrangement is marked by what it is *not*: it is not collision but near-miss; not the heat of conflict but the cool of trajectories that no longer cross. In the geometric language the series has developed elsewhere, it is the condition of *zero-phase adjacency*—two paths brought close in space while the phase that would have accumulated between them goes to nothing.² What is felt is distance without departure: still together, no longer meeting.

Domination

The second presentation is the one the word *power* most readily calls to mind, and it is the form to which the bulk of this paper's argument is addressed. Here the disturbance is not that the two pass one another but that one of them is, increasingly, absorbed into the other's path. The signs are well known and easy to enumerate: decisions that were once joint become unilateral; one subject's preferences come to set the default against which

²For the holonomic apparatus—the positive geometric phase of a good cycle, and its arrest—see §8.5 below, and Huang (2025b). The present section uses the vocabulary descriptively; its formal content is deferred.

the other's must justify themselves; the range over which one party may act, dissent, or simply be without consequence narrows. Domination need not be cruel and is rarely announced. Its mildest and most common form is the quiet contraction of one subject's world—fewer friends of one's own, fewer projects of one's own, fewer judgments ventured without first consulting the other's likely response—until the relation that was a coupling of two centres has become the orbit of one body about another. The symptom, stated plainly, is the conversion of a difference between two subjects into a standing asymmetry that no longer moves.

The decoherence of trust

The third presentation is the subtlest, and it furnishes the bridge to the theory of trust the series has already built. A bond may retain every outward form of trust—the vows still spoken, the routines still kept, the signals still exchanged—while the thing those forms were meant to carry has drained away. This is not the *absence* of trust, which would be plain; it is trust *hollowed*, the symbolic vessel intact and the real content gone. The series has a name for the limiting case: *forged trust*, in which the apparatus of fidelity is perfectly maintained over a void.³ Decoherence is the process by which a living trust is brought toward that limit—each act of fidelity performed a little more for the form of it, a little less from the coupling it once expressed—and its phenomenology is the uncanny one of a relation in which nothing can be pointed to as wrong and nothing is any longer right.

8.2.2 The cardinal distinction: reparable misalignment versus structural shadow

Across all three presentations runs a single distinction on which the entire later argument will turn, and which the symptomatology must establish before any mechanism is named. Not every symptom is a pathology.

Reparable versus structural. A symptom of damage may be *reparable misalignment*—

³See Huang (2026), on forged trust and the three channels of trust-formation; and §8.5–§8.6 below for the mechanisms by which the real content drains while the symbolic shell persists.

a local, contingent failure of meeting that the bond can metabolise and from which it can return—or it may be *structural shadow*: a form of estrangement, asymmetry, or hollowing that belongs to the very constitution of a generative bond and cannot be removed without removing the generativity itself. The first calls for repair. The second calls for recognition. To treat the second as though it were the first—to attack, as a fault to be corrected, what is in fact a necessary moment of the bond’s own life—is itself a principal cause of damage.

This distinction is not a hedge. It is the hinge of the paper’s first claim (§8.1.3): that estrangement is, in the first instance, not a malfunction but a necessary moment of self-maintenance. A relation that metabolised *every* misalignment, that returned instantly and completely to concordance after each passing, would be a relation incapable of the dormancy and return through which generative systems renew themselves—a relation, as the cosmological sections will argue (§8.12–§8.14), at equilibrium, and so dead. Some shadow is the price a living bond pays for remaining alive. The clinical art—and the practical art the closing sections reconstruct (§8.15)—begins in the capacity to tell which shadow is which.

The difficulty is that the two are not distinguishable *by their surface*. A drifting-out-of-phase that is the ordinary respiration of a long bond, and a drifting that is the leading edge of domination, can present identically to the one living through them. This is precisely why a symptomatology is insufficient and an etiology is required: the difference between reparable and structural lies not in how the symptom looks but in *how it is caused*—in which of the layers of the bond the disturbance originates, and whether its source is internal to the dyad or pressed upon it from the field of power without. To that question of causation the paper now turns.

8.2.3 A note on what the symptoms share

One observation closes the description and frames the diagnosis. The three presentations—estrangement, domination, the decoherence of trust—look like three different troubles, but each is, at bottom, a disturbance in the same thing: the capacity of two opaque subjects to go on *generating* value between them rather than extracting it, settling it,

or freezing it. Estrangement is generation arrested mid-cycle; domination is generation captured and made to flow one way; decoherence is the symbolic form of generation out-living its real substance. The common object of all three is the generative coupling itself; the common effect is its conversion, by one route or another, from a living circulation into something static—passed, captured, or hollow. The chapters that follow ask, layer by layer, how that conversion comes about, beginning with the most intimate and least culpable of its causes: the simple fact that two subjects do not speak, in the matter of trust, the same language.

8.3. The First Cause: Encoding Mismatch

The etiology begins where culpability is least. Before power has accumulated, before any defence has been mounted or any advantage pressed, two subjects who wish each other nothing but good can still pass without meeting—and they can do so for a reason that lies entirely in the medium through which they reach one another, not in any defect of will. This first cause is the mismatch of the languages in which trust and care are encoded. It is the most intimate of the causes and the one that most resembles innocence, and for exactly that reason it is the one most often misread, by those living through it, as betrayal.

8.3.1 Sincerity has no universal language

The series has already established, in its treatment of the non-binding vow, a thesis that the present section turns to a new use: that *sincerity has no universal language*.⁴ A subject who means well must nonetheless *express* the meaning well, and there is no expression that is meaning as such, prior to and independent of any code. Care must be put into a form—a word, a gift, an act, a silence—and every such form is legible only against a background grammar that assigns it sense. The trouble is that the grammar is not shared. What counts, for one subject, as the very signature of devotion—the reliable provision of material security, say, or the scrupulous keeping of small promises, or the offering of unsolicited help, or the granting of space—may register, against the other’s

⁴See Huang (2026), the chapter on translation: sincerity possesses no medium-independent form but must be encoded, and the encoding language that will succeed depends on the epistemology of its receiver. The present section runs that mechanism in reverse, asking what happens when the encoding fails.

grammar, as something between neutral and faintly insulting. The signal is sent in good faith and arrives as noise, or worse, as a signal of the opposite of what was meant.

The shadow of sincerity. Between two subjects, sincerity is never transmitted directly; it casts a *symbolic shadow*—the encoded, expressible form by which alone it can be conveyed—and it is the shadow, not the sincerity, that the other receives and must read. When the two grammars differ, the shadow cast by one subject’s devotion falls, on the other’s wall, in a shape the other cannot recognise as devotion. Estrangement of this first kind is not a failure of love but a failure of the shadow to be read—a mismatch of codes, prior to and independent of any fault.

8.3.2 The grammars of trust

The point is sharpened when the languages in question are specifically the languages of *trust*—the grammars by which each subject decides what makes another worthy of being relied upon. The series has distinguished a family of such grammars, mutually intelligible only with effort and often not at all. One subject may trust on broadly *evidential* grounds, extending reliance in proportion to a track record of verified performance, and reading the demand for such a record as simple prudence. Another may trust on grounds of *character or virtue*, extending reliance to a person judged to be of a certain kind, and experiencing the demand for evidence as an insult to a bond that ought to be above audit. A third may trust *inductively and relationally*, on the slow accumulation of shared history, so that what builds trust is neither proof nor judgment of character but sheer continued presence. A fourth may trust *institutionally*, reposing confidence in the forms and guarantees—the vow witnessed, the commitment registered, the role formally assumed—and finding a trust that rests on none of these to be alarmingly unmoored.

These are not degrees of the same trust but different grammars of what trust *is*, and a subject fluent in one is, in the others, not merely unpractised but apt to misread. To the evidential subject, the character-truster’s refusal to keep score looks like carelessness;

to the character-truster, the evidential subject's score-keeping looks like the absence of real faith. Each, acting from within an unimpeachable conception of what trusting well requires, presents to the other the very face of *failing* to trust. Here the symptom of decoherence catalogued in §8.2.1 finds its first cause: a trust that is whole on each side can read, across the grammar-gap, as a trust that is draining away.

8.3.3 Why this cause precedes responsibility

Two features of encoding mismatch must be fixed before the diagnosis proceeds, because both will be needed by the ethics and the praxis later.

The first is that this cause *precedes responsibility*. There is, at this layer, no wrong yet done. Neither grammar is mistaken; neither subject has failed in care or in good faith; the misalignment is a property of the pairing, not of either party. This is of consequence for the normative argument (§8.10), because it means the earliest and one of the commonest forms of estrangement is one to which the language of fault simply does not yet apply. To reach for blame here—to read the unread shadow as evidence of the other's coldness or one's own insufficiency—is not merely unkind but *diagnostically false*: it imports a category, responsibility, that the situation does not contain, and in doing so converts a repairable mismatch into a manufactured grievance. A principal harm at this layer is done not by the mismatch but by its misreading.

The second is that encoding mismatch, though it precedes power, is the *site* at which power will later take hold. For a grammar is never merely private. Which grammar of trust gets treated as the default—the “normal” or “mature” or “reasonable” way to trust, against which the other's grammar appears as deviation requiring explanation—is not decided by nature but settled, in any given dyad and any given culture, by forces that the later sections will name. When one subject's trust-grammar is tacitly installed as the standard and the other's marked as the exception, the difference of codes has already begun to harden into an asymmetry of standing. The mechanism of that hardening is not yet our subject; its material and historical sources are reserved for §8.11. What matters here is only to mark the seam: the most innocent of the causes is also the surface along which the least innocent will eventually run.

8.3.4 The corrective, and its limit

If the cause is mismatch, the corrective is, in principle, translation—and the series has already described its mature form. Between incommensurable grammars, trust can be rebuilt neither by one subject projecting their own code onto the other (which merely repeats the mismatch louder), nor by demanding the other adopt one's own (which is mismatch backed by force). It can be rebuilt only by *mutual translation*, in which each labours to render their own sincerity into a shadow the other can read, while extending to the other's alien grammar what the series has called *epistemic hospitality*—the presumption that the other's way of trusting is a way of trusting, and not a deficiency in it.⁵

But the corrective has a limit that it is the special business of *this* paper, and not of its predecessor, to mark. Translation is a labour, and labour is performed under conditions; and where the conditions are set by an asymmetry of power—where one subject can afford to wait for the other to translate and the other cannot, or where one grammar is backed by the authority of a family, a custom, or a purse and the other is not—the ideal of mutual translation does not simply fail to obtain. It *inverts*. What presents as translation becomes the quiet imposition of the stronger grammar under the name of mutual understanding; the weaker party, translating ever harder into a code not their own, mistakes their growing fluency in the other's language for the growth of intimacy, when it is in fact the early accomplishment of domination. The corrective to encoding mismatch is therefore available in full only between subjects whose power is not too unequal—which is to say, only when the conditions that the rest of the paper concerns itself with are already, to some degree, secured. With that limit, the first cause hands the inquiry to the second: for even where the grammars are matched and the will to translate is whole, two subjects can still fall out of phase, by a mechanism that lies not in the code but in the act of prediction itself.

⁵On the three paths—projection, multiple encoding, and mutual translation—and on epistemic hospitality as the corrective to both manipulation and a covert epistemological arrogance, see Huang (2026).

8.4. The Second Cause: The Unattributability of Prediction Error

Suppose the grammars are matched. Suppose two subjects have done the labour of translation, read each other's shadows faithfully, and extended to each other the hospitality the first cause requires. They can still fall out of phase—and now by a mechanism that lies not in the code but in the very act by which each subject holds the other in mind. This second cause is, in the author's view, the deepest of the internal ones, and it is the layer at which the present paper makes its first substantive addition to the series. It concerns prediction: what each subject must do to remain coupled to a being it cannot enter, and what happens when that prediction begins, irreparably, to fail.

8.4.1 The predictive coupling

A subject cannot read another's interior directly; opacity, as the introduction insisted, is here ontological and not merely technical (§8.1.2). What a subject has instead is a *model*—a generative model of the other, built up over the history of the bond, by which it anticipates what the other will do, say, want, and mean, and against which it registers what the other actually does. The series has used this predictive-coding vocabulary before, in its account of how trust is *built*: trust, on that account, is what accrues when a subject's prior model of the other is borne out, when self-exposure lowers the cost of being wrong, and when an active leap of inference is rewarded by the other's response.⁶ The coupling of two subjects, in this language, is the ongoing mutual tuning of two generative models, each predicting and being predicted, each updating on the error between expectation and event.

The good case is a coupling in which prediction error, when it arises, is *informative*—attributable to a definite source, and so usable to update the model toward a better fit. The other did something unexpected; the unexpected thing has a legible cause—a mood, a circumstance, a thing not said—and the model, taking the cause on board, predicts a little better next time. Error of this kind is not the enemy of coupling but its very nutrition. A bond grows precisely by being surprised and learning from the surprise.

⁶See Huang (2026), the chapter unifying the three channels of trust under predictive coding: the structural or prior channel, the self-exposure or likelihood channel, and the active-inference channel. The present section runs the same mechanism toward the opposite outcome.

8.4.2 When error cannot be attributed

The disturbance enters when prediction error arrives *without an attributable source*. The other deviates from the model, repeatedly, and the deviation cannot be assigned: it is impossible to tell whether the error means *the other has changed*—so that the model is now simply out of date and must be revised; or whether it is *noise in the channel*—a passing perturbation signifying nothing, to be ignored on pain of overfitting; or whether *one's own prior was wrong all along*—so that the model was never a good model of this other, and what is collapsing is not the bond but an illusion about it. These three attributions call for opposite responses—update, ignore, or demolish—and the catastrophe of this layer is that the subject *cannot tell which is owed*. The error is real and persistent; its meaning is undecidable.

The unattributability of error. What triggers the bond's self-protection is not prediction error as such—error is the nutrition of coupling—but error that *cannot be attributed*. When a subject cannot decide whether persistent deviation means the other has changed, the channel is merely noisy, or its own prior was mistaken, no update is safe: to revise may be to chase noise; to ignore may be to miss a real change; to demolish may be to destroy a sound bond over a transient. It is the *undecidability of attribution*, not the magnitude of error, that does the damage.

8.4.3 Active withdrawal: estrangement as defensive disinvestment

Faced with persistent, unattributable error and no safe update, a predictive system has one further move, and it is the move that constitutes this layer's form of estrangement. It can reduce its *coupling*—lower the gain on its predictions of the other, narrow the range over which it stakes anything on being right, cease to expose itself to the error by ceasing, in some measure, to predict the other at all. In the vocabulary of active inference, the system can act so as to bring its sensory stream back within the range its model can already handle, not by improving the model but by *withdrawing from the part of the*

world that the model cannot track. Applied to a bond, this means: to stop reaching, to lower the stakes, to invest less of oneself in anticipating the other—to pass, henceforth, at a safe distance.

This is the second cause's central and, I think, original claim: that *surechigai* at this layer is not coldness, not indifference, and not the failure of love, but the *defensive disinvestment of a predictive system that can no longer attribute its errors*. The withdrawal is, on its own terms, rational—a way of stanching a loss that cannot be stopped by any available update. And it is, precisely because it is rational and self-protective, almost impossible to read correctly from the other side, where it presents not as self-protection but as the cooling it is so often mistaken for. One subject withdraws to stop bleeding; the other reads the withdrawal as the withdrawal of love, and—being also a predictive system facing now its own unattributable error—withdraws in turn. The structure of this spiral is the matter of the section on power proper (§8.6); here it is enough to have named its engine.

8.4.4 The same mechanism, the opposite outcome

It must be made explicit what has happened, because it is the section's contribution to the architecture of the series. The mechanism that produces estrangement here is *the very same mechanism* that the earlier paper showed to produce trust. Trust was the active-inference leap rewarded: a subject exposed itself, predicted the other generously, and found the prediction borne out, and the coupling tightened. Estrangement is that identical machinery running toward the opposite pole: a subject exposed itself, predicted the other, found the prediction defeated by errors it could not attribute, and the coupling, in self-defence, loosened. There are not two mechanisms, one benign and one malign. There is one predictive coupling, and its direction—toward tightening or toward withdrawal—is set by whether the errors it encounters can be attributed and so metabolised, or cannot.

The reversibility of the predictive mechanism. Trust-formation and estrangement are not distinct processes but a single predictive coupling traversed in opposite directions. The same machinery that tightens a bond when its errors are attributable loosens it when they are not. This identity has a practical consequence reserved for the praxis (§8.15):

the work that protects a bond at this layer is not the elimination of error—which would be the elimination of coupling itself—but the maintenance of the conditions under which error remains *attributable*.

That consequence belongs to the later argument, but its shape is already visible, and it confirms the paper’s governing thesis from an unexpected angle. One cannot, at this layer, act directly on the love—cannot will the coupling to tighten, cannot legislate trust into being. One can act only on the *conditions of attribution*: on whether the channel is clear enough, the exposure mutual enough, the shared history legible enough, that errors arriving between the two can be assigned a source and so turned back into the nutrition of the bond rather than the trigger of its retreat. The political economy of conditions, announced in the introduction as the limit of what the symbolic can reach, here receives its first concrete instance. And it points already beyond the dyad: for whether error can be attributed depends not only on the two subjects but on the field around them—on whether third parties, scripts, and powers are injecting noise into the channel or clarity into it. With that, the internal causes have been laid out as far as the dyad alone can carry them, and the inquiry must widen to the field. But one internal layer remains: the layer at which the failure is not of code, and not of prediction, but of the value that the coupling was supposed to generate—the layer at which the phase itself stops accumulating.

8.5. The Third Cause: The Arrest of Phase

The first cause lay in the code, the second in the act of prediction. The third lies in neither: it lies in the *value* that the coupling was supposed to generate, and in the geometry of its generation. Two subjects may share a grammar and attribute their errors faithfully and still find that nothing new is any longer being made between them—that the bond, though intact, has stopped *generating*. To say precisely what has failed, and why “passing without meeting” is the exact phrase for it, the section draws on the geometric apparatus the series developed to distinguish good cycles from bad. This is the layer at which the descriptive image of §8.2.1—estrangement as *zero-phase adjacency*—receives its formal

content.

8.5.1 Value as holonomy: a recapitulation

The series has argued that the value generated by a relational coupling is not a substance stored in either party but a *geometric phase*: a quantity that accrues only along a closed path traversed *together*, and that depends on the path and not merely on its endpoints.⁷ Two subjects, interpreting each other and the world, trace a loop in the space of shared meaning; if the loop closes upon a configuration that is not identical to its start but *lifted*—returned with a surplus that neither held before and neither can claim alone—then the cycle has positive holonomy, and that surplus is the value generated. A bad cycle is one that returns to exactly where it began, having moved meaning nowhere (zero holonomy), or one that returns depleted, having drained one party to inflate the other (negative holonomy). On this account value is intrinsically *path-dependent and joint*: it cannot be accumulated by one subject alone, and it cannot be accumulated at all unless a loop is actually closed.

8.5.2 The geometry of passing-without-meeting

This apparatus yields an exact definition of the estrangement the paper has so far only described. *Surechigai* is the condition in which two trajectories are brought close—adjacent in the space of meaning, near enough to touch—while the phase that would accumulate *between* them goes to zero. The two are proximate and the holonomy is nil. This is why estrangement is so precisely *not* collision: a collision is an interaction, an exchange of momentum, an event with consequence; zero-phase adjacency is the absence of consequence at the very point of nearness. The subjects are close enough that something should be generated, and nothing is. They pass.

⁷For the holonomy apparatus—value as the geometric phase accumulated around a closed interpretive loop, the curvature of the relational connection as the local density of value-generation, and the sign of the holonomy as the formal criterion separating a good (positive) cycle from an extractive (zero or negative) one—see Huang (2025b). The present section uses this apparatus to characterise the failure of accumulation.

The arrest of phase. *Surechigai*, at this layer, is the *arrest of geometric-phase accumulation*: the interpretive loop that the two subjects were tracing together bifurcates or fails to close, so that no surplus is lifted and no value is generated, even as the two remain adjacent. Estrangement is not the divergence of two paths into the distance—that would be mere separation—but their nearness *without* accumulation: zero holonomy at close approach. The bond is intact; the generation has stopped.

8.5.3 Three forms of arrest

The arrest takes three forms, which are the three causes this layer contributes to the etiology, and which correspond to three ways a jointly traced loop can fail to generate.

The first is *bifurcation of the loop*. The two subjects, formerly tracing one loop in shared meaning, begin to trace two—interpreting the same events along paths that no longer coincide, so that there is no single closed loop around which a common phase could accumulate. Each may be generating value on their own path; but value, on the holonomy account, is what accrues *jointly*, around a shared loop, and two private loops, however active, generate no *relational* surplus. This is the value-theoretic form of the predictive withdrawal of §8.4: where prediction has disinvested, the loop has split.

The second is *the loop that fails to close*. Here the two are still on one path, but the path no longer returns—each interpretive venture is left open, unresolved, never brought back to be witnessed and lifted into shared surplus. The series has argued that the good cycle is one that *refuses settlement* while nonetheless closing its loop, so that meaning is moved without being fixed; the failure here is the opposite-yet-adjacent pathology of a loop that, never closing at all, accumulates nothing because accumulation requires return. Activity without closure is not generativity; it is dispersion.

The third is *accumulated negative curvature*. The path may close, but it now runs across a region of the relational manifold that earlier passings have bent. Past estrangements are not erased; they deposit curvature—scar tissue in the geometry—and a loop traced across scarred ground accumulates phase less readily, or accumulates it with the wrong

sign. This is the layer’s contribution to the paper’s account of *time* (§8.12, §8.11): a bond keeps a ledger, and the geometry through which today’s loop must pass is the record of every loop traced before. Estrangement, here, is partly the debt of estrangements past.

8.5.4 Formalising the “objective obstacle”

This layer also lets the paper make good on a phrase used loosely until now: the *objective obstacle* that intervenes in the emergence of value. The obstacle is objective in the precise sense that it is not a matter of either subject’s will or feeling but a feature of the *geometry* they jointly inhabit. A loop can fail to close, bifurcate, or run across negative curvature regardless of how much either party wishes it otherwise, just as a path on a curved surface accumulates a holonomy fixed by the surface and not by the traveller’s intentions. This is what it means to say that the arrest of value is not, at bottom, a psychological failure but a geometric condition—and it is what makes the arrest, like the two causes before it, in the first instance *blameless*. No one need have done wrong for a loop to fail to close; the curvature was there, or the paths bifurcated, and the phase did not accumulate.

The objective obstacle. The arrest of value-generation is an *objective* obstacle: a property of the relational geometry the two subjects jointly inhabit, not of either subject’s will or feeling. A loop fails to close, splits, or crosses negative curvature as a feature of the manifold, not as an act of either party. Hence the intervention of obstacle in the emergence of value is, like encoding mismatch and unattributable error, prior to responsibility—and hence, too, it cannot be removed by good will alone, but only by the slow re-shaping of the geometry through which the loops are traced.

8.5.5 Closing the internal causes

With the arrest of phase the etiology has traced estrangement through the three layers internal to the dyad: the code (§8.3), the prediction (§8.4), and the value (§8.5). They are not three separate troubles but three depths of one: a mismatch of grammars makes

errors harder to attribute; unattributable error triggers predictive withdrawal; predictive withdrawal splits the loop and arrests the phase. Each layer feeds the next, and each, taken alone, is blameless—a property of the pairing, the channel, or the geometry, and not yet of any will. This blamelessness is the great finding of the internal etiology, and it is what the ethics of §8.10 will have to reckon with: that the commonest and deepest forms of estrangement arrive before responsibility does, and that the reach for blame is itself, so often, the first genuine wrong.

But the dyad is not closed, and the three internal causes do not exhaust the field. Around the two subjects run the powers the introduction named—families, scripts, institutions, the sediment of histories—and these do not merely add a fourth cause alongside the three. They change the standing of the first three, deciding which grammar is default, injecting the noise that makes error unattributable, bending the manifold across which the loops must run. To take their measure, the paper must now widen from the dyad to the field, and for that it requires a theory of how opaque subjects build, or fail to build, order between them under no common authority. It requires, that is, a reconstruction of the theory of international relations—to which the next section turns.

8.6. The Fourth Cause: Opaque Subjects and the Order-Problem

The three internal causes were traced within the dyad, as though the two subjects stood alone. They do not. Around them runs a field of powers, and through them runs the question those powers pose: how can two beings who cannot enter one another, who answer to no authority above them, and who act always under uncertainty, nonetheless build between them an order—a trust, a coordination, a peace? This is the question of *international relations*; and the burden of this section is that, properly reconstructed, it is also, and more purely, the question of the intimate bond. The reconstruction is delicate, because the discipline of IR carries within it assumptions that the generative-relational account must reject, and others it urgently needs. The section separates them.

8.6.1 Reconstructing the object of IR

What is the theory of international relations a theory *of*? The realist tradition gives one answer: it is the theory of how states, as like units in a condition of anarchy, pursue

survival under the imperative of *relative power*, so that the fundamental currency of the system is the relative gain—what one unit has only insofar as another lacks it.⁸ On this answer, the master concepts are the balance of power, the security dilemma in its material form, and the alliance as an instrument of relative advantage. And on this answer, IR is useless to us—worse than useless, for its central assumption is precisely the one the generative-relational account identifies as the mark of a *bad* cycle. A bond in which value is reckoned in relative gains, in which one subject has worth only insofar as the other lacks it, is not a hard case of intimacy but a relation that has already decayed into extraction (zero or negative holonomy). To import the realist currency into the dyad is not to analyse intimacy but to assume its corruption.

But realism is not IR. Stripped of its particular and contestable hard core, the discipline has a deeper and more general object, which its own constructivist and English-School traditions have always pursued: the problem of how *opaque actors build order under uncertainty without a central authority*. Three conditions define this object, and not one of them mentions relative power. The actors are *opaque*—they cannot read one another’s interiors and must infer them. They act under *uncertainty*—no actor knows another’s true disposition or future conduct. And they stand in *anarchy* in the strict and non-pejorative sense: there is no authority above them to enforce agreements or adjudicate disputes.⁹

The reconstructed object of IR. The deep object of international relations is not the pursuit of relative power among states but the more general problem of *how opaque subjects, unable to enter one another directly, build trust and order under uncertainty and in the absence of any authority above them*. So defined, the intimate dyad is itself an instance of the IR problem—and a purer instance than the international one, because the opacity of subjects is here *ontological* rather than merely practical: it is not that the

⁸For the structural-realist core—anarchy, like units, survival, and the primacy of relative over absolute gains—see Waltz (1979); for its offensive variant, Mearsheimer (2001).

⁹For anarchy as a structure whose meaning is constituted by the practices of its actors rather than given—“anarchy is what states make of it”—see Wendt (1992); for the conception of an *international society* in which order arises from shared norms and institutions rather than from power alone, Bull (1977).

other's interior is hard to observe, but that it is constitutively unsymbolisable, circled by a vacancy no observation could fill.

This is the pivot on which the section turns. The intimate bond satisfies all three defining conditions more exactly than any state system: no sword can be borrowed to enforce a vow between two persons (the anarchy is complete), no future fidelity can be known in advance (the uncertainty is total), and no lover can read the beloved's heart directly (the opacity is ontological, not technical).¹⁰ What IR studies under the cover of states, the intimate bond exhibits in its pure form. And the most developed contemporary statement of this reconstructed IR comes, fittingly, from a relational theory of world politics that the next subsections will both draw on and demarcate.

8.6.2 Power is ineliminable within the dyad

The first temptation, once the realist currency is rejected, is to over-purify: to imagine the dyad's interior as a power-free zone, a clearing of pure generativity into which power intrudes only from outside. This temptation must be refused, and refusing it is the precondition of everything that follows. *Power is internal to the dyad, ineliminably.*

The reason is ontological and was given in the introduction. The subjects are symbolic subjects—subjects constituted in and through the symbolic order—and wherever there is a symbolic relation there is already an asymmetry: whose word counts as the neutral description and whose as the special pleading; whose grammar of trust (§8.3) is treated as the default and whose as the deviation; whose desire sets the rhythm the other must read. These are not intrusions of external power; they are the micro-physics of any relation between symbolic beings. There is no coupling of two subjects so loving that it contains no asymmetry, because to be a symbolic subject in relation is already to occupy a position, and positions are not equal.

It follows that the health of a bond cannot consist in the *absence* of internal power. It must consist in something else:

¹⁰On the impossibility of borrowing an external sword to bind an intimate vow—the constitutive anarchy of the dyad—see the account of the non-binding vow and relational self-legislation in Huang (2026).

Health is not the absence of power. A healthy intimate bond is not one from which internal power has been eliminated—that is impossible for symbolic subjects—but one in which power is continuously *transformed by the generative logic* rather than allowed to solidify into standing domination. Internal power is not a pathology to be cured but a permanent condition to be metabolised. The pathology is not power; it is its freezing.

This reframing does real work later. It means the internal causes of §8.3–§8.5 were never power-free either: the default grammar, the clear or noisy channel, the curvature of the manifold are all already shot through with micro-asymmetries. And it means that the relational theory of world politics, to which we now turn for resources, must be taken up critically—for it, too, risks an over-sweet picture of relation as pure mutual empowerment.

8.6.3 The continuous gradient, and regime bleeding

If power is internal as well as external, then the picture of two discrete zones—a generative inside and a power-laden outside—is too crude. What the dyad actually inhabits is a *gradient*: a continuous field in which the concentration of power-logic rises as one moves outward from the dyadic core, through near kin, to extended family and clan, to the institutions and scripts of the wider society. At the core, power is present but dilute, held in solution by the generative logic; further out, it grows denser, less metabolised, more apt to crystallise into standing structure. There is no sharp boundary between a power-free interior and a power-laden exterior, only a rising concentration along a continuum.

This gradient picture is what makes intelligible the most insidious of the external causes, and the one the paper marks as a central original contribution: *regime bleeding*. Because the inside and the outside are continuous rather than walled off, the power-logic dense at the periphery can *seep inward* along the gradient and contaminate the dyadic core—can install, at the heart of a coupling that should run on the non-zero-sum logic of relational wealth, the relative-gains calculus proper to the periphery.

Regime bleeding. Because power varies continuously from the dyadic core outward rather than dividing into walled zones, the dense power-logic of the periphery can seep inward and contaminate the core, converting a non-zero-sum generative coupling into a relative-gains calculus. This is the most insidious of the external causes precisely because no boundary is breached—the contamination travels a continuous gradient—and because it can corrupt a core that is, in itself, entirely healthy. “To manage my family, you must prove you are worth it”: the sentence imports, into the heart of the bond, an accounting that the bond cannot survive. A healthy dyad can be hollowed from the periphery inward without any internal fault whatever.

Regime bleeding (cause 15 of the etiology) is the hinge between the internal and external causes, and it explains why the dyad cannot simply be sealed against the field. The seepage is possible only because the boundary is semi-permeable—and the boundary *must* be semi-permeable, because a dyad sealed absolutely against the field would be a dyad cut off from the external connections on which, as the praxis will argue (§8.15), its own internal balance partly depends. The same permeability that lets in the noise lets in the air. This is the first appearance of a structural cause (cause 17) that the cosmological sections will take up: the semi-permeable boundary is not a defect to be sealed but a permanent condition to be managed.

8.6.4 Estrangement as the interaction-failure of opaque subjects

With the reconstructed object in hand, the four lenses of the etiology can be seen to converge. *Surechigai*, viewed through the reconstructed IR, is the characteristic interaction-failure of two opaque subjects building order without an arbiter: it is *misperception*, *mistranslation*, *withdrawal*, and the failure of *return*, named all at once. Each of the prior lenses described one facet of a single thing. The trust-grammar mismatch (§8.3) is mistranslation: the IR literature on *misperception* describes exactly this—the systematic divergence between a signal’s intended and received meaning, arising not from bad faith but from the differing cognitive schemata of sender and receiver, and unknown, often, to

both.¹¹ The unattributable error and predictive withdrawal (§8.4) is the *security dilemma* in its cognitive, not its material, form: a defensive disinvestment, undertaken purely to stanch one's own unmanageable error, that the other cannot but read as hostility, and answers with disinvestment of their own.¹² And the arrest of phase (§8.5) is the failure of *return*—the loop that, in IR's terms, never reaches the cooperative equilibrium that repeated interaction was supposed to build, because each round's unattributable defection resets it.

This convergence is the analytic payoff of the reconstruction. It shows that the four causes are not a list but a cascade, and that the reconstructed IR is the framework in which the cascade can be seen whole: opaque subjects, predicting one another across an unbridgeable interior, mistranslate (cause-layer one), cannot attribute the resulting error (cause-layer two), withdraw to protect themselves, and so fail to close the loop that would have generated value (cause-layer three)—all of it under no authority that could arbitrate, and all of it liable to contamination from a periphery dense with power (cause-layer four). The reconstructed IR does not add a fourth cause beside three others; it is the stage on which all four play out.

8.6.5 Isomorphism, and the rupture: the two-level teleology

It remains to state, with precision, both how far the intimate bond is *like* a state system and exactly where the likeness breaks—for the break is the deepest structural finding of the section, and it governs everything in the chapters on means that follow.

The likeness is real. Both the dyad and the state system are populations of opaque actors building order under uncertainty without an arbiter; both face misperception, the cognitive security dilemma, the problem of credible commitment, the temptation to withdraw. The strategies that opaque actors have devised for surviving such a condition—the subject of the next section—therefore transfer, with care, from the one domain to the other. To this extent the isomorphism holds, and IR earns its place in the argument.

¹¹For misperception as a systematic, schema-driven divergence between intended and received signals—a cognitive rather than a power-theoretic phenomenon—see Jervis (1976).

¹²The security dilemma admits two readings. Its realist version (Mearsheimer 2001) turns on relative power and is rejected here; its cognitive version turns on uncertainty and the misreading of defensive behaviour as threat, and requires no concept of relative power at all. It is only the latter, cognitive version that the present argument employs.

But the likeness breaks at a single, decisive point, and the break is not one of degree but of *teleological order*. For a state, in the realist understanding, survival is the terminal end: the state survives in order to survive, and there is no further good, beneath survival, that survival serves and might betray. The intimate bond is not like this. Its survival is not terminal but *instrumental*: the two contend with power, balance, defend, and endure *in order to protect* something that is not itself a matter of power at all—the dynamics of love, the generativity of the real coupling, the non-power order that is the bond's actual end. The dyad is a *two-level* system where the state system is single-level.

The two-level rupture. The intimate bond is isomorphic to a state system in its surface problem—opaque actors building order under uncertainty without an arbiter—but ruptures from it in teleological order. For the state, survival is the terminal end. For the dyad, survival of the power-order is merely the *means* to a further and non-power end: the generativity of the real coupling it exists to protect. The dyad is two-level; the state system, single-level. And the means has an intrinsic tendency to damage the end—a defence mounted to protect the love can import the very relative-gains logic the love cannot survive—so that the dyad must do something a state never must: win its security *without* letting the winning corrupt the thing secured.

This is the precise content of the claim, ventured loosely in the introduction, that the intimate relation faces, on certain axes, a problem *more complex* than the international one, even as it is incomparably smaller in scale. The greater complexity is not a matter of more variables. It is the two-level structure itself: a state optimises a single objective (survival), whereas a dyad must pursue an instrumental objective (security against power) that is in standing tension with the terminal objective it serves (the generativity of love), under the constant risk that the means will consume the end. A small system with two incommensurable levels can be harder to govern than a large one with a single level. This is why the relational theory of world politics, for all its affinity with the present account, cannot simply be adopted: it rightly sees relation as a source of power that is *power-to*

rather than *power-over*—a co-empowering, mutually generative capacity rather than a capacity for domination—but it does not equip itself with the holonomic criterion that distinguishes a good relational cycle from a bad one, nor with the account of the real that explains why the bond’s terminal end cannot be reached by the very relational means that secure it.¹³

The rupture sets the agenda for the second of the paper’s three questions. The dyad must defend the conditions of its love against the field of power; the tools for that defence are the reconstructed strategies of IR; but those tools operate at the level of means, and the love they defend lives at the level of an end they cannot touch. To use them well is therefore to know exactly what they can and cannot reach—which is the burden of the next section, on the political economy of conditions, and its successor, on the inventory of strategies and the teleological filter that decides which of them a bond may use without destroying what it defends.

8.7. Protecting the Unsymbolisable: The Political Economy of Conditions

The rupture identified at the close of the last section—that the dyad’s security is a means to an end the means cannot touch—is not a difficulty to be managed but the central methodological fact of the entire paper, and this section states it in full. It is the section on which the paper’s distinctiveness rests. Every theory the paper recruits to the second question—how love is not destroyed by power—is a theory of the means; and the burden here is to establish, exactly, what the means can and cannot do for the end. The answer is severe, and it governs all the practical chapters that follow: *the tools of power and of wealth can protect the conditions under which love occurs, but they cannot produce, secure, or even touch the love itself.*

¹³For the relational theory of world politics—relation as itself a form of power, power as more often *power-to* (co-empowerment) than *power-over* (domination), and the *yin-yang* dynamic of mutual completion as a generative process irreducible to either party—see Qin (2018). The present account draws on this conception of power-to while marking three points of divergence: it adds the holonomic criterion separating good from bad relational cycles (Huang 2025b); it grounds relation in the Lacanian real and its unsymbolisable remainder, where the relational theory rests on a Confucian grammar of reciprocity; and it locates, at §8.9, an ontological account of why such relation must continually generate a counter-force against its own freezing.

8.7.1 The end is a process of the real

The reason lies in what the end *is*. The dynamics of love—the generativity of the coupling, the thing all the defending is for—is a process of the *real*, in the register the series has used throughout. It circles a vacancy, *das Ding*, that cannot be fully taken up into the symbolic; it is not a quantity and admits no measure; it is not a good and enters no exchange. The series established this elsewhere as a thesis about value: that the value generated in a good coupling is non-appropriable and cannot be siphoned, precisely because it is not a thing held but a phase accumulated around a vacancy that no party occupies.¹⁴ What is true of the value is true of the dynamics that generate it: they belong to the real, and the real is, by definition, what escapes complete symbolisation.

8.7.2 The instruments are symbolic, and the touch decoheres

The instruments of protection, by contrast, are without exception *symbolic*. An IR strategy, a balance, an alliance, a boundary-work, a deployment of relational wealth—each operates by representation, calculation, comparison, the assignment of value to commensurable objects. They live in the symbolic order, which is their power and their limit. For a symbolic instrument applied *directly* to a process of the real does not protect that process; it transforms it, and the transformation is destruction.

The decohering touch. A symbolic instrument cannot act directly upon a process of the real without changing its nature, and the change is loss. Love managed—made the object of strategy, calculation, or deployment—decoheres: counted, it is no longer the uncountable thing it was; secured by guarantee, it is no longer the unsecured thing whose very lack of guarantee was its substance; deployed as wealth, it becomes wealth, and ceases to be love. The attempt to seize the real with a symbolic tool does not capture the real; it replaces it with its symbolic shell. This is the mechanism of the decoherence of trust catalogued in §8.2.1, and its limiting case is the forged trust of Huang (2026): the apparatus perfect, the substance gone.

¹⁴On the real value that circles the vacancy and cannot be appropriated or siphoned—as against the imaginary value organised around a possessable object—see Huang (2025b).

The point is not that managing love is difficult or distasteful. It is that it is a *category error* whose result is the annihilation of the thing managed. One does not protect a flower by handling the bloom; the handling bruises it. This is not a counsel of passivity—there is a great deal to be done—but a specification of *where* the doing must be directed.

8.7.3 Fence and bloom

The governing image of the paper's method can now be stated. What the symbolic instruments protect is not the bloom but the *conditions* of the bloom—the soil, the light, the absence of what would trample it. One builds a fence not to cause the flowering, which the fence cannot do, but to keep out the feet and the frost that would prevent it. The fence is wholly in the order of means—it can be designed, built, measured, repaired—and it is wholly necessary, for without it the bloom is at the mercy of the field. But the fence does not bloom, and no perfection of fence-building ever produced a flower. The blooming follows a logic the fence cannot reach: the logic of the real, of *das Ding*, of the desire that circles it.

Fence and bloom. The operations of power can protect only the *surrounding conditions* under which the dynamics of love may occur—the cleared space, the warded boundary, the channel kept clear enough for error to remain attributable—never the dynamics themselves. The fence is the whole domain of strategy: necessary, buildable, and powerless to cause the flowering it makes room for. To confuse the two—to believe that a sufficiently well-built fence is a flower, that perfected conditions *are* love—is the characteristic error of every attempt to engineer intimacy, and it ends, reliably, in a walled and barren plot.

8.7.4 The political economy of conditions, not of love

From this follows the exact and limited title under which IR and the political economy of relational wealth may enter the argument. They are admitted as a *political economy of conditions*—never as a political economy of love. Everything the series has said about relational wealth, everything this paper will say about balancing, hedging, alliance, and boundary-work, belongs to the management of the fence: it concerns the security, the clearing, the warding, the keeping-open of the space in which a coupling may generate. None of it concerns, because none of it *can* concern, the generation itself. The generativity of love is not a managed output of the political economy; it is what the political economy exists to make room for, and falls silent before.

This is a real limit on the paper’s own apparatus, and it is stated as such. The holonomic value-theory, the predictive-coding account, the IR strategies—powerful as they are at the level of conditions—are mute at the level of the end. They can tell us when value has failed to accumulate and diagnose the obstacle; they cannot tell us how to make the loop close, for the closing is an event of the real. The most a political economy of conditions can do is clear the ground and keep it clear, and then wait, as a gardener waits, on a process it serves but does not command.

8.7.5 Trust as the interface

One element of the system, and one only, crosses the line between the two levels—and this is why *trust* stands in the paper’s title beside power and estrangement. Trust is neither wholly a condition nor wholly the bloom. It is the interface between them.

On one side, trust can be *cultivated by symbolic means*, and the series has shown how: by costly and credible signals, by the structural priors a shared history lays down, by the slow projection of a real fidelity into observable, readable form. To this extent trust belongs to the fence—it can be built, tended, and on occasion repaired by instruments of the symbolic order. On the other side, trust is *rooted in the real*: at its limit it is not an inference from evidence but a coupling that cannot be faked, a fidelity that is what it is beneath all its signs, and that the signs at best express and at worst forge.¹⁵ Trust

¹⁵On relational trust as spanning the structural, self-exposure, and active-inference channels—and thereby crossing from the symbolic into the real—see Huang (2026).

is thus the one place where the work done on the conditions reaches *toward* the bloom without ever seizing it: a credible signal does not produce the real coupling, but it clears the ground on which the real coupling may, or may not, occur. Trust is the bridge by which the political economy of conditions touches the hem of what it protects.

Trust as interface. Trust is the sole element of the bond that crosses both levels: cultivable, in part, by symbolic means, and yet rooted in a real coupling that cannot be faked. It is therefore the interface through which the political economy of conditions reaches toward—without ever seizing—the dynamics of love it exists to protect. And it is, as the next chapters will show, the variable that decides whether an asymmetry of power becomes generative or frozen: for an asymmetry suffused with trust empowers, while the same asymmetry voided of trust dominates. Trust runs through every question the paper asks because it is the one thread that runs through both of the levels the paper holds apart.

8.7.6 What this licenses, and what it forbids

The section closes by fixing what its central distinction permits and prohibits in the chapters to come. It *licenses* a full and unembarrassed political economy of the fence: the next section's inventory of IR strategies, the praxis of boundary-work and counterforce, the deployment of relational wealth to secure the conditions of a coupling—all of this is legitimate, necessary, and the proper business of the means. It *forbids* the migration of any of these instruments across the interface to the management of the end: the moment a strategy, a balance, or a calculation is turned upon the love itself rather than upon its conditions, it ceases to protect and begins to decohere. The discipline the paper imposes on itself, and recommends, is therefore not a quietism but a *vigilance about direction*—a constant attention to whether a given operation is tending the fence or handling the bloom. With that discipline fixed, the paper can proceed to its inventory of the fence-tending strategies, and to the filter that decides which of them a bond may

use without, in the using, trampling what it meant to protect.

8.8. The Inventory of Strategies, and the Teleological Filter

The previous section licensed a political economy of the fence and forbade its migration to the bloom. This section conducts that political economy. It surveys what the long history of opaque actors surviving under anarchy has actually devised—the inventory of IR strategies—and then subjects each to a filter the international case never required: the *teleological filter* that asks, of every strategy, not merely whether it secures the actor but whether the securing damages the end the security was for. Many strategies that serve a state perfectly well destroy a dyad, and the filter is what tells them apart. The section is thus the hinge between the diagnostic chapters and the practical ones: it builds the toolbox the praxis (§8.15) will use, and marks, on each tool, whether it may be used at all.

8.8.1 The classical inventory

The strategies opaque actors have devised for surviving a field of power fall into three families, to which a fourth, institutional set may be added.

The first family is *balancing*—the generation of counter-weight against accumulating power. It subdivides, in the classical literature, into *internal balancing* (the building-up of one's own capacities rather than reliance on others) and *external balancing* (alliance with others against a common power), and into the finer manoeuvres of *buck-passing* (letting another bear the cost of balancing while one free-rides), *chain-ganging* (being bound, through alliance, into another's conflicts), and *offshore balancing* (holding back, intervening only as needed to maintain a balance one does not directly join).¹⁶

The second family is *accommodation*—survival through yielding rather than opposing. It includes *bandwagoning* (aligning with the stronger party rather than against it, typically through asymmetric concession and the acceptance of a subordinate role), *appeasement*

¹⁶For the internal/external distinction and the dynamics of balancing under anarchy, see Waltz (1979); for buck-passing and chain-ganging as recurrent alliance pathologies, the classical literature on alliance behaviour.

(yielding a part to forestall the loss of the whole), and *compensation* (granting an interest elsewhere to secure one's core concern).

The third family is *avoidance*—survival by declining to enter the contest at all: *neutrality* (refusing to take sides) and *isolation* or *exit* (reducing one's surface of contact with the power-field).

To these the liberal-institutionalist tradition adds a fourth set, aimed not at relative position but at the stabilisation of expectations and the reduction of misperception: the *concert* (management of conflict through regular consultation), *confidence-building measures* (incremental, symmetrical, verifiable steps that build trust between parties who cannot inspect one another's intentions), and *calculated ambiguity* or the maintenance of a buffer (the preservation of strategic latitude so as to avoid being forced to a showdown).

8.8.2 The teleological filter

Now the filter. A state may use any of these as its situation dictates, for a state's only end is survival and any strategy that secures survival is, by that fact, justified. A dyad cannot, because its survival is a means to a further end—the generativity of the love—and a strategy that secures the means while corrupting the end is, for a dyad, a defeat dressed as a victory. The filter sorts the inventory into three classes.

The teleological filter. A strategy admissible for a state, whose end is survival, may be inadmissible for a dyad, whose survival is merely the means to the generativity it protects. Every strategy must therefore be filtered by whether the securing damages the secured. Three classes result: strategies *directly admissible* (they protect the conditions of autonomy and are teleologically neutral); strategies admissible *only after reconstruction* (sound in form but carrying a relative-gains currency that must be stripped before use); and strategies *inadmissible* (they secure survival precisely by corrupting the end, so that their success is the defeat).

Directly admissible. Three of the newer strategies pass the filter unaltered, because their logic is the protection of autonomy rather than the pursuit of relative advantage. *Resilience*—the reduction of exposure to single points of failure, the building of redundancy and diversified channels—is teleologically neutral: it secures a party’s autonomy without reckoning in anyone’s relative loss, and recent work on small-state survival has rightly shifted the emphasis from balancing toward exactly this.¹⁷ *Hedging*—the refusal to be forced into a binary alignment, the maintenance of latitude through deliberately ambiguous signalling—protects the bond’s space against capture by an external script, and is, as §8.8.3 will argue, peculiarly suited to the dyad. And the *buffer* or calculated ambiguity protects a core from premature exposure. These three tend the fence and reckon no relative gain; they are admitted whole.

Admissible only after reconstruction. *Balancing* and *external alliance* are sound in form—the generation of counter-weight against a power is exactly what the suppression of freezing will require (§8.9)—but they carry, in their classical statement, the currency of relative gain, and that currency must be stripped before they cross into intimate use. A dyad may form an alliance against an external power (two partners presenting a united front to a coercive family); but the moment the calculative logic of the alliance is turned *inward*—the moment the partners begin to manage one another as an alliance manages its members, with united fronts and coordinated positions inside the dyad—it has become *regime bleeding* (§8.6.3), the periphery’s logic installed at the core. Likewise *fait accompli*: legitimate as a move against an external veto-holder, but, turned between the partners themselves, simple manipulation. These strategies are admitted only on condition that their relative-gains currency is stripped and their operation confined to the external face.

Inadmissible. *Bandwagoning*—survival through asymmetric concession and the acceptance of subordination—is the paradigm of the strategy that secures the means by destroying the end. A partner may indeed secure the relationship’s continuation by yielding, accepting the subordinate role, ceasing to dissent; the bond survives. But what survives is no longer a generative coupling, for the love required the mutual subjecthood that the

¹⁷On the shift from balancing to resilience in small-state strategy—autonomy as the management of one’s own vulnerabilities rather than dependence on external guarantee, and resilience as reduced exposure to single points of failure rather than self-sufficiency—see the contemporary small-state literature.

bandwagoning has surrendered. The relationship persists as a structure of domination—which is to say, the very pathology the whole enterprise was meant to prevent. So too any strategy that treats the partner as a relative-gains adversary: it may win the local contest and has, in winning, lost the war. These are not admitted at all.

8.8.3 Why the dyad is harder than the state

The filter exposes, in concrete strategic terms, the greater complexity the paper has claimed for the small system. A state may treat its strategies as separable: it balances against rivals and conducts its internal affairs by other logics entirely, and the two need not interfere. The dyad cannot separate them, for the external power it must balance against—the powerful elder, the clan—is frequently *the very same person* who is also, at the core, a member of the bond's own generative field, someone the partners love (cause 16, the inseparability of identity). One cannot balance cleanly against a beloved. The classical binary choice—*balance or bandwagon*—therefore fails for the dyad, because to balance against the elder is to wound the partner's own bond to their family, while to bandwagon is to surrender the dyad's autonomy. Neither pure strategy is available.

This is the deep structural reason that hedging suits the dyad as no classical strategy does: hedging is precisely the refusal of the binary, the maintenance of a position that is neither balancing nor bandwagoning but a third thing, holding latitude open where the classical choice would force a showdown that the inseparability of identity makes catastrophic. What in the state system is a sophisticated option is, in the dyad, very often the only non-destructive move.

8.8.4 The newer resources: power's many dimensions, and the right to justification

Two strands of recent scholarship deserve separate notice, because they supply the dyad with resources the classical inventory lacks, and because both bear directly on the suppression of freezing to come.

The first is the recognition that power is *multidimensional*, so that an actor weak along one axis may be strong along another and recover agency through it.¹⁸ This matters

¹⁸For the typology of power across compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive dimensions—and thus for the possibility that an actor weak in material terms may be strong in others—see Barnett and

because the classical inventory, fixated on a single axis of relative capability, cannot see the counter-force that a partner weak in resources may exercise through narrative, through the very dependency of the stronger party's affection, through the infrapolitical "weapons of the weak." The multidimensionality of power is, as §8.9 will argue, what makes generative balance possible at all: it is because power has many sources that no single accumulation can be final, and counter-force can always, in principle, be generated along an axis the dominant power does not control.

The second is the *right to justification*: the principle that relational domination consists in one party's being subject to another through an asymmetry that the subordinated party cannot demand be justified to them, and that the corrective is the standing entitlement to require justification.¹⁹ This furnishes the symbolic order with a concrete counter-power mechanism, internal as well as external: the entitlement of either party to demand that the other's exercise of power be justified to them drags a power that would otherwise operate silently—the hidden power lodged in defaults and unspoken rules—back into the space of the answerable. It is, as the praxis will show (§8.15.5), the principle underwriting the practice of meta-communication and of dissent.

8.8.5 The empirical caution: balance is not a law of nature

A final empirical finding frames everything the next section will build, and it must be entered here, where the strategies are inventoried, lest the praxis rest on a false comfort. It is tempting to suppose that power, left alone, balances itself—that counter-force arises spontaneously, so that a relation need only avoid interference and equilibrium will return. The historical record refuses this comfort. The systematic study of balancing across many international systems finds no tendency of systems to equilibrate on their own; where hegemony was prevented, the preventing force often lay outside the system rather than arising within it.²⁰ The lesson transfers directly and soberingly to the dyad: counter-

Duvall (2005); for the everyday, infrapolitical forms of resistance available to the materially subordinate, Scott (1985).

¹⁹For relational domination as subjection to an asymmetry of power that need not be justified to the subordinated, and for the right to justification as its normative corrective, see Forst (2012).

²⁰For the finding that international systems do not reliably self-equilibrate, and that the strong checks on hegemony have often lain outside the system rather than within it, see the comparative-historical literature testing balance-of-power theory across world history.

force does *not* arise on its own. Power, unopposed, accumulates and freezes; the balance that keeps a relation generative is not a natural equilibrium to be awaited but a force to be continually *generated*. This finding is the empirical ground of the negative summit to which the paper now turns—the account of generative balance, and of why the freezing of power must be actively, perpetually opposed.

8.9. Generative Balance: Against the Freezing of Power

This section is the first of the paper's two summits, and the bearer of its second and central claim. Everything to this point has been diagnosis and method: the forms power's damage takes, the layers through which estrangement is caused, the reconstruction of IR, and the strict limit of what symbolic means can do for a real end. The question now is the constructive one. Given that power is real, ineliminable, and—as the last section's empirical caution established—not self-balancing, what is to be done? The answer is the paper's deepest positive thesis, and it is not the elimination of power but the perpetual generation of a force against its *freezing*. The section builds the thesis in three movements—power's ineliminability, the distinction of static from generative balance, and the redefinition of connection it forces—and then, in its second half, grounds all three in an ontology that shows the thesis to be not an ethical demand laid upon generativity from without, but a law generativity already obeys.

8.9.1 Power is the by-product of difference

The first movement disposes of two consoling errors at once: the optimistic naturalism that expects power to dissolve of itself, and the radical utopianism that proposes to abolish it altogether. Both founder on a single fact: *power is the by-product of difference, and difference is the source of all generativity*.

Wherever two subjects differ, power arises—not as an intrusion but as an entailment of the difference. Difference of information yields the power of knowledge; difference of resources, the power of the economic; difference of capability, the power of the organizational; difference of narrative facility, the power of the discursive. And difference of attachment yields the subtlest and most intimate power of all: the one who loves more is the one who more fears loss, and the one who more fears loss is the one more readily

induced to surrender their freedom. *Love itself produces power.* This last instance is decisive, for it forecloses the optimist's last refuge. One cannot appeal to a sufficiency of love to exempt a bond from power, because love is itself among power's sources. The deeper the attachment, the sharper the asymmetry of fear it can generate.

It follows that power cannot be eliminated without eliminating difference—and difference cannot be eliminated without eliminating the very creativity that makes a relation generative. A relation purged of all difference would be a relation in which nothing new could be generated, for generation, on the holonomic account, is precisely what difference makes possible. The utopian cure is therefore worse than the disease: to abolish power by abolishing difference is to abolish generativity in the same stroke.

The ineliminability of power. Power can neither dissolve of itself nor be abolished. It is the by-product of difference—of information, resources, capability, narrative, and attachment, so that love itself generates power—and difference is the irreducible source of generativity. To eliminate power would require eliminating difference, and to eliminate difference would be to eliminate the creativity it grounds. The optimistic naturalism that awaits power's dissolution and the radical utopianism that would abolish it are both false: the one mistakes power for an accident, the other for a removable evil, when it is the permanent shadow of the very difference without which nothing is generated at all.

8.9.2 Static equality versus generative balance

If power can be neither awaited-away nor abolished, the only coherent aim is to prevent its *solidification*—and here the section draws its central distinction, between two utterly different conceptions of how a relation might be just.

The first is *static equality*: the design, at some founding moment, of a fair arrangement—an equal division, a balanced contract, a settlement of roles and rights—which is then expected to hold. Its fatal flaw is temporal. Difference does not cease after the founding;

power continues to accumulate along its many axes; and the fair arrangement, fixed at the start, is steadily overtaken by the asymmetries that go on forming after it. A static equality, however just at its founding, ossifies—and an ossified arrangement, returning always to the same fixed configuration while the real distribution of power drifts beneath it, is in the geometric language a cycle of *zero holonomy*: motion that generates nothing, a settlement that has become a tomb. Static equality is the political form of thermodynamic equilibrium, and equilibrium, as the cosmological sections will insist (§8.12), is death.

The second is *generative balance*: not the achievement of a fair state but the perpetual maintenance of a *mechanism that re-balances*. It does not aim at a distribution and freeze it; it aims at keeping alive the capacity to generate counter-force as fast as power accumulates. Its principle is dynamic—

Power accumulation $\longrightarrow$ counter-force generation

—power grows, and the generation of counter-power grows with it, so that the system never settles into a fixed distribution but remains in the far-from-equilibrium condition that, for a dissipative structure, is the very condition of life. The ecosystem is the standing image: a forest has dominant species, but no species expands without limit, because predators, competitors, environmental change, and new arrivals continually generate the counter-forces that keep any single dominance from becoming total. The forest is not equal. It is balanced—dynamically, perpetually, never finally.

Static equality versus generative balance. Static equality designs a fair distribution and expects it to hold; but difference continues, power re-accumulates, and the fixed arrangement ossifies into a cycle of zero holonomy—the political form of equilibrium, which is death. Generative balance abandons the fixed distribution for the perpetual maintenance of a re-balancing mechanism: power accumulation provokes counter-force generation, and the system stays alive precisely by never settling. Justice in a generative relation is therefore not a state to be achieved but an activity to be sustained—not the equality of a distribution but the liveliness of the counter-force that keeps any distribution from freezing.

8.9.3 The redefinition of connection

This reconception forces a redefinition of *connection* itself, against the common understanding that takes deep connection to mean the dissolution of difference—the merging of two into a frictionless one. That understanding is exactly wrong, and the reason is now visible. If difference were dissolved, power would indeed momentarily vanish—but so would creativity, for difference is the source of both. The frictionless union is not the summit of connection but its death: a static equality of the most intimate kind, generating nothing.

The deeper connection is the opposite: the *preservation* of difference, together with the maintenance of conditions under which the differences may continually correct one another. Connection, on this account, does not abolish the two-ness of the two; it keeps them two, and keeps the channel between them open, so that their difference remains a perpetual source of mutual correction and mutual generation rather than freezing into a relation of command. The task is not to remove difference but to ensure that difference *generates rather than dominates*—that the asymmetry it inevitably produces is continually metabolised into creation instead of crystallising into rule. This is close to the Deleuzian refusal of a final and correct order in favour of a system that retains the capacity to produce new differences, new connections, new lines of flight.²¹

Connection as the preservation of difference. The deepest connection is not the dissolution of difference into a frictionless union—which would abolish, with difference, the creativity difference grounds, and is merely static equality at its most intimate—but the preservation of difference under conditions that let the differences continually correct one another. To connect is not to become one but to remain two with the channel open,

²¹For the conception of a politics that does not install a permanent correct order but sustains the capacity to generate new difference and new *lignes de fuite*—lines of flight that escape any totalising capture—see Deleuze and Guattari (1987); the resonance is with the diagnosis of control as the capture of such lines, not with a vitalist optimism the present account explicitly qualifies in §8.9.6.

so that difference goes on generating rather than freezing into command. The axes one (§8.10: the generation of good value) and two (the suppression of freezing) are thus not opposed but draw on a single fuel—difference—which the one turns to creation and the other guards against crystallisation into rule.

8.9.4 The summit: the isomorphism with the dialectic of desire

The thesis as stated so far—generate counter-force perpetually, preserve difference, oppose the freezing of power—reads as a normative recommendation, a thing one *ought* to do. The summit of the section is the claim that it is not, at bottom, a recommendation at all, but the political appearance of an ontological law that generativity already obeys. The argument proceeds by an isomorphism with the dialectic of desire, and the isomorphism must be taken in a strong sense—not as a metaphor or an illuminating parallel, but as two instances of *one underlying structure*.

Recall the structure of desire in the register the series has used. The real cannot be fully taken up into the symbolic; were it fully symbolised—were the object-cause of desire ever completely captured, *das Ding* finally filled—desire would terminate, and with it the subject's life as a desiring being. Desire persists *because* symbolisation necessarily fails, because there is always a remainder of the real that escapes the symbolic net. This necessary failure of capture is not a defect of desire but the very condition of its continuation: complete symbolisation would be the death of desire.²² Desire, that is, has a double structure: it drives toward symbolisation—it wants to be expressed, recognised, taken up into meaning—and it simultaneously *resists complete symbolisation*, withholding a core that, once captured, would extinguish it. This double movement is what maintains the difference between the real and the symbolic, and it is the maintenance of that difference that keeps desire—and so the subject as a living, generative being—alive.

Now the political structure. Difference, the source of both creativity and power, is to a

²²For *das Ding*, the object-cause of desire, and the constitutive failure of symbolisation that sustains desire rather than defeating it, see Lacan (2006); and for the prior development of this register across the series, Huang (2025b).

generative relation what the real is to desire. Were difference ever fully encoded into a fixed power-structure—were the relation’s asymmetries completely captured in a frozen and total order—generativity would terminate, for difference would have ceased to be a living source of correction and become a settled structure of rule. Generativity persists *because* difference resists complete encoding, because there is always a remainder—a line of flight—that escapes capture by any power-structure. This necessary failure of total capture is not a defect but the condition of generativity’s continuation: complete encoding would be its death. And the counter-force whose perpetual generation the section has urged is nothing other than the political name of difference’s resistance to its own complete encoding—the same withholding-from-capture that, in the register of desire, keeps desire alive.

The ontological law. Generative balance is not an external ethical demand laid upon generativity but the political appearance of a law generativity already obeys: *the maintenance of generativity requires that a system hold itself incompletely captured by its own products*. Desire, generating symbols, withholds itself from total symbolisation, on pain of extinction; a generative relation, generating power, must withhold itself from total encoding into a frozen power-structure, on the same pain. The resistance of the real to complete symbolisation and the resistance of difference to complete encoding are not analogues but two instances of one structure. Hence *surechigai* receives its ultimate cause: estrangement is difference, like the drive, refusing to be completely symbolised—two subjects who can never fully encode one another, because complete mutual encoding would be the death of desire and so of the generativity between them. The passing-without-meeting is not the failure of the bond but the sign that it is still alive.

8.9.5 The tension: why counter-force must be *generated* if resistance is automatic

The isomorphism raises, at once, an objection sharp enough to undo it if unanswered, and answering it deepens the thesis. If the resistance of difference to encoding is, like

the drive's resistance to symbolisation, an *intrinsic and automatic* property—something difference simply does, by its nature—then why has the paper insisted (§8.8.5) that counter-force does *not* arise on its own, that power left unopposed accumulates and freezes? The two claims appear to contradict: resistance automatic, yet counter-force needing active generation.

The resolution lies in distinguishing two orders. At the *ontological* level, the resistance is indeed automatic: difference does always throw off a remainder, there is always a line of flight, the materially subordinate always retain the infrapolitical weapons of the weak (§8.8.4). Total capture, at this level, almost never occurs; some residue always escapes. But the symbolic order develops, over time, *second-order mechanisms for capturing the lines of flight themselves*—disciplinary apparatuses, the metrics of a social-credit logic, the weaponisation of the very interdependence through which connection runs, the commodification that absorbs even resistance and sells it back.²³ These second-order mechanisms do not abolish the ontological resistance—they cannot—but they suppress its *effect*, capturing each line of flight as it forms.

Guarding, not inventing, the lines of flight. The resistance of difference to total encoding is ontologically automatic, but the symbolic order evolves second-order mechanisms that capture the lines of flight as fast as they form. Hence “generating counter-force” does not mean conjuring resistance from nothing—the resistance is always already there—but *guarding the always-present resistance against the second-order mechanisms that would capture it*. It is the protection of the lines of flight, not their invention. This dissolves the tension and unifies the two practical axes the praxis will develop: *non-action* (*wu-wei*) is right toward the ontological resistance, which arises of itself and need not be forced; *action* is required against the second-order capture, which does not relent of itself and must be perpetually opposed.

²³On the capture of relational and infrastructural interdependence itself, so that the channels of connection become instruments of coercion, see Farrell and Newman (2019); the broader point—that an order evolves means to capture the escapes that would otherwise limit it—generalises the diagnosis of control in Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

8.9.6 The discipline: isomorphism, not reduction; and the tragic remainder

Two disciplines guard the summit against misreading, and the section closes by stating them, for without them the isomorphism would overreach in exactly the ways its critics would expect.

The first is that the isomorphism is *formal, not reductive*. The claim is that the resistance-to-capture in desire and the resistance-to-capture in generative relation share an underlying structure—a double movement toward and away from complete capture—not that political struggle “is” desire, nor that the relational field is a libidinal economy in disguise. The series has held this discipline at each of its formal couplings—with predictive coding, with the geometry of phase, with the dynamics of the quantum—and it holds it here: the dialectic of desire furnishes a fully theorised *model* of the structure, and the political thesis is shown to instantiate that structure, without either being collapsed into the other.

The second is that the tragic dimension of the desire-structure must be *kept*, not sweetened. Desire’s persistence is also its perpetual lack: to desire is to be marked by a want that no object fills, and the continuation of desire is the continuation of that want. The political isomorph inherits the cost. Generative balance is not a happy equilibrium of perpetual liveliness; it is the refusal of a rest that would be death, purchased at the price of a relation that can never arrive at the stillness of a final fairness, a complete concordance, a last reconciliation. This is where the section rejoins the paper’s first claim, and gives it its deepest ground. *Surechigai* is not an accident to be one day overcome but the standing price of remaining alive: the cost difference pays for refusing to be wholly encoded, the cost desire pays for refusing to be wholly symbolised, the cost a generative relation pays for refusing the frozen peace of equilibrium. The passing-without-meeting and the perpetual want are one structure, seen in two registers. The bond that has stopped passing has not been perfected; it has died.

A final word marks the summit’s reach and its restraint. The law stated here—that the maintenance of generativity requires a system to hold itself incompletely captured by

its own products—is stated for the intimate bond, and the paper claims it only there. But it plainly does not stop there. Raised to the level of a political body, it yields a criterion for evaluating any such body: whether, in generating its value, it also generates the counter-force that keeps its own power from freezing—whether its growth returns to its creators or is captured, whether its lines of flight are guarded or absorbed. That criterion, and its relation to the theories of non-domination, of agonistic plurality, of the right to justification, and of generative justice, is the seed of a separate work (Eglish 2016), and the paper marks it as such and does not pursue it here. It belongs to the next question—how love becomes free within history—to which, after the positive summit of asymmetry, the paper turns.

8.10. Generative Asymmetry: When Difference of Power Generates

The previous section was the paper’s negative summit: it asked how the freezing of power is to be opposed, and answered that a generative relation must perpetually withhold itself from total capture. But a paper that asked only how power is prevented from doing harm would have told half the story, and the worse-lit half. For if power is the by-product of difference, and difference is the source of all generativity, then power cannot be only a threat to the good—it must, under the right conditions, be among the good’s own conditions. This section is the positive summit, and it asks the question the diagnostic and defensive chapters left unasked: *when, and how, does an asymmetry of power generate rather than dominate?* The answer completes the paper’s account of power and supplies the criterion the praxis will need to tell cultivation from harm.

8.10.1 Power and generativity are co-original

The whole argument to this point has tacitly placed power and generativity in opposition: power as what damages, captures, freezes; generativity as what power threatens. The inside was generative, the outside power-laden; *power-over* was the enemy, *power-to* the friend. This opposition, useful as a first orientation, cannot be the last word, and the reason was given at the negative summit. Power and generativity spring from the same root. Difference generates value *and* difference generates power; they are not opposed terms but co-original products of the one source. It follows that an asymmetry of power

is not, as such, the antithesis of generativity. It is ambivalent—capable of freezing into domination, capable also of serving as the very condition under which certain goods are generated at all.

The point is sharpened by observing that the goods in question *cannot* be generated between equals. There is no teaching between two who know the same; no nurture between two equally capable of self-care; no healing between two equally whole; no initiation between two equally versed. These are generative relations—among the most generative there are—and every one of them *requires* an asymmetry of power as its precondition. To demand their symmetry is not to perfect them but to abolish them. The asymmetry is not a regrettable feature to be minimised on the way to an ideal equality; it is constitutive of the good the relation generates.

The co-originality of power and generativity. Power and generativity are co-original products of difference, not opposed terms. An asymmetry of power is therefore ambivalent: it may freeze into domination, or it may be the constitutive condition of a good that cannot be generated between equals. Teaching, nurture, healing, and initiation are all generative relations that *require* asymmetry as their precondition; to demand their symmetry is not to perfect them but to abolish them. The question is never whether asymmetry is present—in a generative relation it always is—but in which direction it runs.

8.10.2 The structure of good asymmetry: self-diminishing, non-appropriative

What, then, distinguishes a generative asymmetry from a dominating one? Not its magnitude, and not its presence, but its *structure in time and its relation to appropriation*. Four paradigms display the structure, and they are not chosen at random: each is a relation in which an asymmetry of power is undeniable and in which, when the relation is good, the asymmetry is exercised in a manner that tends toward its own diminution and refuses to appropriate the one it acts upon.

In *teaching*, the asymmetry of knowledge is real, and the good teacher exercises it so as to dissolve it: the aim of the teaching is a student who no longer needs the teacher, an asymmetry deployed toward its own cancellation. In *nurture*—the rearing of a child—the asymmetry is total at the outset and absolute in kind, and yet the whole art of good nurture is the cultivation of a being who will, in time, not require it: a power exercised for the sake of producing a subject who outgrows that power. In *healing* and the tending of the vulnerable, the asymmetry of one whole and one stricken is undeniable, and the good of it lies precisely in a manner of bearing the asymmetry that does *not* convert the other’s weakness into the carer’s standing power—that receives the vulnerability without accumulating advantage from it, and works toward the other’s restored subjecthood rather than their continued dependence. In *initiation and guidance*—one party more versed in some domain leading another into it—the good is the gradual mutual enrichment in which the led becomes, in their turn, one who can lead.

The common structure is unmistakable, and the series has a name for it from its earliest pages. The good asymmetry is exercised in the manner of *xuande*—the “mysterious virtue” of the *Daodejing*: to generate without possessing, to act without exacting, to lead without ruling.²⁴ Teaching, nurture, healing, guidance: each is, when good, a *zhang er bu zai*—a fostering that does not rule, a power that leads without subjugating and whose telos is the flourishing, and ultimately the empowered independence, of the one it acts upon.

The structure of generative asymmetry. A generative asymmetry is distinguished from a dominating one not by its magnitude but by its structure: it is *self-diminishing*—exercised toward its own eventual reduction rather than its perpetuation—and *non-appropriative*—it does not convert the other’s lesser position into standing advantage for itself. This is the power-form of *xuande*, the fostering that does not rule (長而不宰). Teaching toward the student’s independence, nurture toward the child’s outgrowing of it, healing toward the other’s restored subjecthood, guidance toward the led one’s own

²⁴生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。 “To give life without possessing, to act without exacting, to lead without ruling: this is called the mysterious virtue.” See Laozi (1963). The four paradigms are, severally, instances of 長而不宰—to lead or foster without ruling.

capacity to lead: in each, the asymmetry serves the empowerment of the one subordinate to it, and tends thereby toward its own diminution.

8.10.3 The criterion: power-to versus power-over

The structure yields a criterion, and the criterion is the affirmative counterpart of the value-theory the series has used throughout. A dominating asymmetry is *power-over*: it exercises difference so as to maintain or widen the other's dependence, drawing standing advantage from the other's lesser position—which is to say, in the language of the series, treating the other as *fuel*, a resource consumed to sustain the dominant party's position. A generative asymmetry is *power-to*: it exercises difference so as to empower the other, such that value accrues to the one acted upon and the cycle runs toward positive holonomy. The criterion is therefore continuous with the holonomic criterion of the good cycle, and with its ethical core: *does the exercise of asymmetry return value to the one subordinate to it, or does it siphon their value to the one in power?*

Power-to versus power-over. The criterion distinguishing generative from dominating asymmetry is the direction of value's flow. *Power-over* exercises difference to maintain dependence and draws advantage from the other's lesser position, reducing the other to fuel; *power-to* exercises difference to empower the other, returning value to the one acted upon and running the cycle toward positive holonomy. This is the power-form of the series' standing criterion—whether anyone is reduced to mere fuel—and of the generative-justice principle that value should return to those who generate it (Eglash 2016). Asymmetry is just not when it is absent, which is impossible, but when its value flows toward the subordinate rather than away from them.

8.10.4 Trust as the mediating variable

What decides which way a given asymmetry runs? Here the paper's third title-term returns to do its decisive work, and the two summits are joined. The variable that mediates between generative and dominating asymmetry is *trust*.

Consider the four paradigms again. In each, the asymmetry generates the good *only because it is mediated by trust*: the student entrusts themselves to the teacher in the confidence that the knowledge-power will not be turned to keep them dependent; the child's utter exposure to the parent's total power is borne by—and only safely borne by—a trust that the power will be exercised for the child's outgrowing of it; the patient yields their vulnerability to the healer on trust that the weakness will not be converted into the healer's leverage. Subtract the trust, and the identical asymmetry inverts: the teacher who is not trusted to relinquish power becomes the master who hoards it; the untrusted parental power becomes control; the carer who exploits rather than receives the vulnerability becomes the abuser. *Same asymmetry, opposite outcome—and trust is the hinge.*

Trust as the hinge of asymmetry. Trust is the variable that decides whether an asymmetry of power becomes generative or frozen. Asymmetry suffused with trust empowers: the one in the lesser position can entrust themselves to the greater power in the confidence that it will be exercised toward their empowerment and not their subjection, and on that confidence the good—the teaching, the nurture, the healing, the guidance—is generated. The same asymmetry voided of trust dominates: the lesser position becomes exposure to be exploited, and the power-to collapses into power-over. This is why trust stands in the title beside power; and it is the precise point at which the present paper welds to its predecessor's account of how trust is built (Huang 2026), for the production of trust there described is, here, revealed as the condition under which difference of power generates rather than dominates.

8.10.5 The completion of the account of power

The two summits now stand together, and the account of power is complete. The negative summit (§8.9) showed that power must be prevented from freezing—that a generative relation withholds itself from total capture, perpetually guarding the lines of flight against the second-order mechanisms that would seize them. The positive summit shows that power, unfrozen and mediated by trust, is not merely to be tolerated but is among the conditions of the good—that the very asymmetry the negative summit guards against freezing is, when it runs toward the other's empowerment, the generative source of teaching, nurture, healing, and guidance. The two are not in tension; they are the two faces of a single thesis about difference. Difference generates power; the power can freeze, and must be kept from freezing; the same power, kept liquid and turned toward the other, generates the good. The whole normative content of the paper is the maintenance of that double condition: keep the asymmetry from freezing, and keep it turned toward empowerment—which is to say, keep it suffused with trust and incompletely captured.

This completes the answer to the second of the paper's three questions—how love is not destroyed by power—by showing that the question was incompletely posed. Power does not only threaten love; rightly structured and rightly trusted, difference of power is part of how love generates a world at all. There remains the third question, the one neither the diagnosis of harm nor the account of asymmetry has yet touched: how a bond, having learned to generate the good and to guard it against freezing, might come to be *free*—free not in the abstract but within history, against the inherited weight of the material conditions that laid down its asymmetries in the first place. To that question, and to the dialectical-materialist account it requires, the paper now turns.

8.11. The Dialectical-Materialist History of Intimate Power

The two summits completed the account of power as a structure: how it freezes and must be kept from freezing, how its asymmetry can dominate or generate. But a structure is not a fate, and to leave the account there would be to present the power-relations of an intimate bond as though they were given, timeless, simply there to be managed. They are not given. They are the historical sediment of particular material conditions, and what has been sedimented can, in time, be dissolved. This section takes up the third of

the paper's questions—how love becomes free within history—and it requires a method the paper has not yet deployed: a historical materialism. But it requires that method in a specific form, and the section's first task is to fix which form, because the wrong form would undo, in a sentence, everything the paper has built.

8.11.1 A statement of standpoint: dialectical, not mechanical

There are two historical materialisms, and the difference between them is decisive here. The first, which may be called *mechanical*, holds that the economic base unilaterally determines the superstructure: the relations of production fix the legal, ethical, symbolic, and affective forms of life, which are their passive reflection. Taken strictly, this version reduces love to an effect of its economic base—and would thereby annihilate, at a stroke, the real unsymbolisable core the paper has laboured to protect, dragging the bloom back into the order of determined conditions and calling it determined too.

The section stands, instead, on *dialectical* historical materialism, and the distinction is not a softening but a fidelity. The dialectical version holds three things the mechanical one does not. First, that history advances not by smooth determination but by the motion of *contradiction*—the tension between forces and relations of production, the unity and struggle of opposites—so that the engine of change is internal tension, not one-way causation. Second, that the superstructure possesses *relative autonomy* and *reacts back* upon the base: the symbolic, ethical, and affective life that material conditions shape is not their passive reflection but a force that in turn conditions and, under conditions, reshapes them.²⁵ Third, that history moves by the *negation of the negation*, a spiral and not a line—which is, the section will note, the very form the series has used throughout.

Constraint without determination. On the dialectical reading, “material conditions

²⁵The reduction of historical materialism to a one-way economic determinism was repudiated within the tradition itself; the relative autonomy of the superstructure and its reaction upon the base belong to the dialectical statement of the doctrine, not to a revision of it. The present account takes this as the orthodox rather than the heterodox reading. For the foundational analysis of how the social relations of a mode of production sediment into apparently natural forms, see Marx (1976); for the material history of the reproduction of life and its bearing on the forms of intimate and familial power, Federici (2004).

constrain but do not determine” is not a dilution of historical materialism but its orthodox statement: the base exerts determining force, *and* the superstructure—symbolic, ethical, affective—retains a relative autonomy through which it reacts upon the base. The mechanical reading, which makes the superstructure a passive reflection and reduces love to an effect of its economic base, is the deviation from the dialectic, not its rigour. The paper’s “safe version” is therefore the faithful version: it preserves both the constraining force of conditions and the agency and contingency that the freezing of power would otherwise be granted as fate.

8.11.2 The historical genesis of power-structure

With the standpoint fixed, the first substantive claim follows. The power-structure of an intimate field is not a timeless form of “the family” or “the couple” but the sediment of particular relations of production. The authority of the powerful elder is not an eternal feature of kinship; it rests on a specific economic base—the control of resources, of inheritance, of the bestowal and withdrawal of recognition—and on the superstructure that base raised up: the ethics of filial duty, the institutions of lineage, the social functions assigned to marriage. These are historical formations, and they move. As the material base shifts—as the children of a generation attain economic independence, as geographic mobility loosens the grip of locality, as the social functions once concentrated in the family migrate to other institutions—the elder’s power, which rested on that base, historically wanes.

This is of the first importance for the negative summit (§8.9), to which it supplies a material ground for hope. The freezing of power is not a metaphysical fate but the product of transient material conditions; and conditions change. Counter-force, therefore, is not the futile opposition of an eternal structure but the work—sometimes the patient awaiting, sometimes the active hastening—of a change in the material conditions on which a transient structure rests. The dialectical-materialist standpoint converts the suppression of freezing from a Sisyphean labour against the permanent into a historical labour with the grain of the possible.

8.11.3 Marriage as the dialectical sublation of two material histories

The section's central scene is the one that first motivated it: that a union joins not two individuals but *two material histories*. A marriage, dialectically understood, is the bringing-together of two sets of relations of production, two material pasts, two ethico-symbolic systems each sedimented from a different economic base, into one contested present. Each partner carries into the new field the grammar of trust (§8.3), the expectations of role, the very forms of affective expression, that their own material history laid down; and these do not merely coexist. They contradict.

The union of two material histories. A union is not the joining of two individuals but the integration of two material histories—two sets of relations of production and the ethico-symbolic systems sedimented from them. This supplies a material ground for the internal causes: the mismatch of trust-grammars (§8.3) is, at depth, the contradiction of two political economies of affective expression; the external power of elders (§8.6.3) is a determinate historical form of the family, waning as its material base shifts; and regime bleeding (§8.6.3) finds its historical explanation in a new field not yet possessed of an economic base independent of the old relations of production, and so still embedded in them.

But the bringing-together is, when it goes well, neither the victory of one material history over the other nor their inert juxtaposition. It is a *sublation*—an *Aufhebung*—in which the contradiction of the two systems (the moment of the negative) is worked, through the practice of the relational field, into a new and shared grammar that did not exist in either: a third thing, carrying a positive holonomy, irreducible to either of its sources. And the dialectical point is exact: sublation does not abolish the difference of the two histories but *preserves* it within a higher unity—which is precisely the redefinition of connection the negative summit reached by another road (§8.9.3). The good union does not erase the two material histories into sameness; it lifts their contradiction into a shared form that keeps the difference alive and generative. Here the dialectical-materialist method

and the holonomic account of value turn out to be describing one movement in two vocabularies: the spiral of sublation and the positive holonomy of the good cycle are the same return-with-surplus, the same negation of the negation.

8.11.4 The constraint on praxis: a dialectical law of history

The standpoint yields, finally, a constraint on the practical chapters to come, and it is the section's contribution to the praxis. The effectiveness of counter-power practice is conditioned by material circumstance. One cannot, by will or by love alone, dissolve a power-structure whose material base remains intact: where a couple's economy still depends on resources the elder can withdraw, no sufficiency of feeling will lift that power, and a counter-force mounted before its material conditions are ripe will fail—not for want of resolve but for want of a base. This is the constraint, and it disciplines the praxis against voluntarism: it explains why some resistances succeed and others fail not by the quality of their strategy alone but by the ripeness of their material moment.

But the constraint is dialectical, and so it cuts the other way as well. Material conditions *open* a space of possibility; they do not fill it. Within the space the ripe conditions open, the outcome is not determined—it retains the agency of the subjects and the contingency of events. There is no necessary trajectory along which intimate liberation must run, no guarantee written into history that love will be freed. To claim otherwise would be to relapse into the teleological determinism the standpoint was chosen to refuse, and would contradict, besides, the paper's governing commitments: the far-from-equilibrium openness of the dissipative account (§8.12), the irreducible remainder of the desire-structure (§8.9.4), and the series' standing refusal of any master-trajectory. Conditions constrain; they do not write the ending.

The dialectical law, and its two edges. The effectiveness of counter-power practice is constrained by material conditions: a structure whose base is intact cannot be dissolved by will alone, and a counter-force mounted before its conditions are ripe fails for want of a base—which disciplines the praxis against voluntarism. But the law is dialectical and cuts both ways: ripe conditions open a space of possibility without determining its outcome,

which retains the agency of subjects and the contingency of events. History constrains the liberation of love; it does not guarantee it. The first edge refutes the optimist who thinks love alone suffices; the second refutes the determinist who thinks history suffices without love.

8.11.5 The division of labour with the real

One danger remains, and disposing of it welds this section to the methodological core (§8.7). Historical materialism, even dialectical, is a theory of how material conditions shape consciousness and its forms; does it not then threaten to reduce love itself—the real, unsymbolisable core—to a determination of the economic base, undoing the very thing §8.7 was written to protect?

It does not, and the relative autonomy of the superstructure is precisely what prevents it. The dialectical standpoint already holds that the symbolic, ethical, and affective life is not the passive reflection of the base but reacts upon it; and the real dynamics of love are the layer of that life least reducible to material determination, the layer whose autonomy is greatest because it circles a vacancy no material condition can fill. Historical materialism, on this account, explains the *conditions* of love's dynamics—the two material histories, the power-structures, the symbolic systems, the economic bases that shape the field in which love occurs—but it does not reach the dynamics themselves. It is, in the exact terms of §8.7, the *diachronic dimension* of the political economy of conditions: where §8.7 described the synchronic structure of the fence (symbolic means, real end), this section describes the fence's historical genesis (how the material past sediments into the present structure). The bloom remains what material conditions make room for and ward, but do not cause.

Historical materialism as the diachronic political economy of conditions. Dialectical historical materialism explains the *conditions* of love's dynamics—the sedimented material histories, power-structures, and symbolic systems that shape the field—but, by

the relative autonomy of the superstructure, does not reach the real dynamics themselves. It is the diachronic dimension of the political economy of conditions: §8.7 gave the synchronic structure of the fence, this section its historical genesis. Material conditions make room for the bloom and ward it; they do not cause it. Historical materialism is thus the temporal ally of the fence-and-bloom thesis, not its reductive rival—and the “condition” so gains a temporal depth (history) to set beside its spatial depth (the gradient of §8.6.3), while the real remains, in both, what conditions protect but never produce.

The same dialectical method governs the series’ treatment of justice elsewhere, where a juridical form adapted to an old material base enters into contradiction with new conditions, and a new form is seen struggling to be born within the contradiction rather than being deduced from the base.²⁶ The method is one across the series, and its lesson for the third question is now complete: love becomes free within history not by escaping material conditions, which is impossible, nor by being delivered by them, which is determinism, but by the labour of subjects working with the grain of changing conditions to dissolve the structures those conditions had sedimented—a freedom that is neither given nor guaranteed, but won, dialectically and in time. With this the three questions have their three answers, and the paper turns to set estrangement within the widest frame it commands: the cosmology of generative systems.

8.12. Dissipative Structure and the Thermodynamics of Generativity

The three questions have their three answers, and a structural account of power under intimacy is, in its essentials, complete. What remains is to set that account within the widest frame the series commands—to show that the findings reached by the analysis of code, prediction, value, power, and history are not local peculiarities of the human bond but instances of something that holds of generative systems as such. This is the office of the three cosmological sections. The first establishes the thermodynamic frame:

²⁶For the dialectical-materialist treatment of juridical and institutional form—old form fitted to old base, contradiction sharpening, new form germinating within the contradiction rather than read off from the base—see the corresponding development in Huang (2026).

that a generative system is a system held far from equilibrium, that estrangement is the necessary signature of its being so held, and that the whole etiology of the diagnostic chapters is, seen from here, the microphysics of a single macroscopic necessity.

8.12.1 Far from equilibrium

The decisive result of non-equilibrium thermodynamics is that order, in certain systems, arises not despite but *because* of their being driven far from equilibrium. A dissipative structure—a convection cell, a chemical clock, a living organism—maintains its order only by a continual throughput of energy and a continual export of entropy; it exists as an ordered thing exactly insofar as it is held away from the equilibrium toward which an isolated system would relax.²⁷ Equilibrium, for such a system, is not rest but death: the state of maximum entropy, of no gradient, no flux, no further change—the state a living thing reaches when it stops being a living thing.

The generative relation is a dissipative structure in this exact sense. Its order—the ongoing generation of relational value—is sustained only by a continual throughput: of difference, of surprise, of the prediction-error that is the nutrition of coupling (§8.4), of the contradiction that the dialectic works into new form (§8.11). Cut off the throughput, resolve all difference, settle every contradiction, and the relation does not achieve a blissful stability; it reaches relational equilibrium, which is the heat-death of the bond. Here the political vocabulary of the negative summit and the thermodynamic vocabulary converge exactly: *static equality is the political name of thermodynamic equilibrium*. The fixed, settled, frictionless arrangement toward which the optimist aspires is the state of no gradient and no flux—and a relation in that state generates nothing, because generation *is* the throughput, and the throughput has stopped.

The relation as dissipative structure. A generative relation maintains its order—the ongoing generation of value—only as a system held far from equilibrium, by a continual throughput of difference, surprise, and contradiction. Equilibrium is not its rest but its

²⁷For dissipative structures and the thesis that order can emerge and be sustained only in systems maintained far from thermodynamic equilibrium by a continual flux, see Prigogine and Stengers (1984).

death: the frictionless concordance toward which the optimist aspires is the state of no gradient and no flux, in which nothing is generated because generation *is* the throughput. Static equality is the political name of thermodynamic equilibrium; and the perpetual non-settling that the negative summit demanded is the thermodynamic condition of remaining alive.

8.12.2 Estrangement as the signature of disequilibrium

This frame transfigures the paper's first claim and gives it its deepest statement. If a generative relation is a system held far from equilibrium, then it cannot be smooth. A far-from-equilibrium system fluctuates; it passes through phases; it does not hold a single steady state but cycles, and the cycling is the very mode of its persistence. *Surechi-gai*—the passing-without-meeting—is, at this level, nothing other than the *signature of disequilibrium*: the visible mark that the system is still being driven, still fluctuating, still alive. A relation that never passed, that held perfect and unbroken concordance, would be displaying the one thing a living dissipative structure cannot display: a steady state at equilibrium. The absence of all estrangement would not be the perfection of the bond but the diagnostic sign of its death.

This is why the symptomatology insisted (§8.2.2) that not every symptom is a pathology, and why the cardinal distinction was between reparable misalignment and structural shadow. We can now say precisely what the structural shadow *is*: it is the estrangement that is not a fault in the system but the necessary fluctuation of a system held from equilibrium—the passing that must occur because the bond is alive and being driven. To attack such estrangement as a malfunction is to attack the disequilibrium itself, which is to push the system toward the equilibrium that is its death. The most destructive misreading in the whole etiology is the demand that a living bond stop fluctuating—that it achieve, once and for all, the steady concordance whose name, correctly given, is heat-death.

8.12.3 The etiology as microphysics

The thermodynamic frame also retrospectively unifies the diagnostic chapters. The four causes traced through code, prediction, value, and power looked, in their own chapters, like four distinct mechanisms of breakdown. Seen from the thermodynamic level, they are the *microphysics of the dissipative phase*—the local, mechanistic detail of how a far-from-equilibrium system fluctuates. The mismatch of grammars, the unattributable error and predictive withdrawal, the arrest of phase, the seepage of peripheral power: these are the channels through which the necessary fluctuation actually propagates, the specific machinery by which a generative system, being driven, passes through its disequilibrium phases. The etiology does not compete with the thermodynamic account; it is its fine grain. And this dissolves what might have seemed a tension in the paper—between an etiology that treats estrangement as caused, layer by layer, and a functional claim that treats it as necessary. The two are the same fact at two scales: the necessity is macroscopic (a driven system must fluctuate), and the causation is microscopic (this is the machinery through which it fluctuates here). Cause and necessity are not rivals but levels.

Etiology and function are levels, not rivals. The layered causation of estrangement (the etiology) and its structural necessity (the functional claim) are not in tension but are one fact at two scales. Macroscopically, a generative system held far from equilibrium *must* fluctuate—estrangement is necessary. Microscopically, the four causes are the machinery through which the fluctuation propagates in a human bond—estrangement is caused, layer by layer. The etiology is the microphysics of the dissipative phase; the functional necessity is its macrophysics. To have an account of how estrangement is caused is not to have refuted the claim that it is necessary, any more than knowing the mechanism of a fluctuation refutes the law that the driven system must fluctuate.

8.12.4 The placement of necessity

A word, finally, on where in the paper's scheme this necessity belongs—a matter left open in the catalogue of causes. The thermodynamic necessity of estrangement was listed, provisionally, among the nineteen causes, as the structural-level entry that explained not any particular passing but why passing must occur at all. It is now clear that it does not sit comfortably there, for it is not a cause in the sense the other entries are. The mismatch of grammars, the unattributable error, the seepage of power—each is a mechanism that produces a particular estrangement, and might in a given case be absent. The thermodynamic necessity is of a different kind: it is not a mechanism that might or might not operate but the macroscopic law that *some* mechanism must, because a living relation is a driven system. It is properly not the nineteenth cause but the *functional ground* of there being causes at all—the reason the etiology has work to do. The paper therefore lifts it out of the catalogue of mechanisms and lodges it here, in the thermodynamic frame, where it belongs: not as one more cause of estrangement, but as the law that makes estrangement, in some form, inevitable for anything alive enough to generate.

With the thermodynamic frame established—disequilibrium as the condition of generative life, estrangement as its signature, the etiology as its microphysics—the cosmological movement can take its next step, from the physics of the driven system to the grammar of its return. For a system that fluctuates does not merely depart; it comes back, and the form of its coming-back is the subject of the oldest cosmology the series draws upon.

8.13. Return and the Spiral

A system driven far from equilibrium fluctuates, and the previous section established that estrangement is the signature of that fluctuation. But fluctuation is not mere departure. A dissipative system that persists does not simply wander away from its states; it *returns* to them—and the entire normative weight of the paper rests on a distinction in the *form* of that return. There is a return that comes back to exactly where it began, and a return that comes back lifted; and the difference between them is the difference between a relation that is dying and one that is alive. This section makes that distinction precise, drawing only on the dynamical and dialectical resources already in play. It is the hinge

between the thermodynamics of the driven system and the dormancy that the next section treats.

8.13.1 Two forms of return

Consider a system that cycles. After a phase of departure—of estrangement, of withdrawal, of the disequilibrium the last section described—it comes back toward coupling. The coming-back can take one of two forms, and they are distinguished exactly by the holonomic criterion the series has used throughout (§8.5).

The first is the *closed circle*: a return to the identical configuration from which the cycle set out, having traversed a loop that accumulated no net phase. This is the return of zero holonomy. The system passes through its phases and arrives precisely where it started, neither lifted nor depleted; nothing has been generated by the circuit. A relation whose every cycle of estrangement-and-reconciliation returns it to exactly the prior state—the same quarrel, the same repair, the same equilibrium, endlessly—is executing closed circles. It is not dead, for it still moves; but it generates nothing by its motion, and a system that cycles without accumulating is, as the cosmological frame insists, on its way to the equilibrium it merely postpones.

The second is the *spiral*: a return that comes back to a configuration *like* its starting point but displaced—lifted along an axis the planar circle does not have, carrying a surplus that the cycle generated and that was not present at the outset. This is the return of positive holonomy. The system passes through the same *kind* of phase it passed through before—another estrangement, another withdrawal, another return—but arrives not at the identical state but at a raised one, enriched by the traverse. The estrangement was not wasted; the loop, in closing, lifted.

The spiral, not the circle. The return of a generative relation is a *spiral*, not a circle. The closed circle returns to the identical state, accumulating no phase (zero holonomy): the same cycle of rupture and repair endlessly repeated, generating nothing by its motion. The spiral returns to a state *like* the prior one but lifted, carrying the surplus the cycle

generated (positive holonomy): the same kind of estrangement traversed, but issuing in a raised configuration the planar circle has no axis to reach. The criterion distinguishing a living return from a dying one is therefore not whether the relation cycles—every driven system cycles—but whether its cycling is helical or planar: whether each return lifts, or merely repeats.

8.13.2 The spiral is the negation of the negation

This is, in the dialectical vocabulary of the preceding section, simply the *negation of the negation*. The first negation is the departure—the estrangement, the contradiction, the phase of disequilibrium that negates the prior coupling. The second negation does not restore the prior coupling unchanged, as though the departure had not happened; it negates the negation, and in doing so produces a new coupling that contains the departure as a moment sublated within it. The result is not the original state recovered but a higher state attained *through* the rupture—which is precisely the spiral, and precisely the *Aufhebung* the account of the union of two material histories reached by its own road (§8.11.3). The dialectical spiral and the positive-holonomy cycle are not two doctrines but one structure described in two vocabularies: the return-with-surplus that distinguishes a generative cycle from a sterile one.

It follows that estrangement is, for a spiralling relation, not the enemy of return but its *means*. The lift is generated *through* the departure, not despite it; a relation that suffered no estrangement would have no first negation to negate, and so no spiral—only the flat persistence of an unchallenged state, which is the closed circle in its limiting, motionless case. This is the strongest form the paper's first claim can take. Estrangement is not merely tolerable, not merely a necessary cost; it is the raw material of the lift, the negation without which there is no negation of the negation, the departure without which there is no enriched return.

8.13.3 Why the spiral cannot be commanded

One caution preserves the consistency of this section with the methodological core (§8.7). That the return *can* be a spiral does not mean the spiral can be commanded. Whether a given departure issues in an enriched return or in mere repetition is not a matter the parties can directly will, for it depends on whether the loop closes generatively—an event of the real, not a deployment of the symbolic. What the parties can do is tend the conditions under which a spiral is possible rather than foreclosed: keep the channel clear enough that the departure's errors remain attributable (§8.4), refrain from depositing the negative curvature that makes the next loop harder to lift (§8.5.3), guard against the freezing that converts a living spiral into a closed circle (§8.9). The spiral is not produced by these; it is made possible by them. One cannot command the lift, only keep open the conditions under which lifting may occur—which is, once more, the whole discipline of the political economy of conditions, here in its temporal aspect.

The spiral is conditioned, not commanded. That a return can be a spiral does not mean the spiral can be willed. Whether a departure issues in an enriched return or in sterile repetition depends on the generative closing of the loop, an event of the real beyond direct symbolic command. The parties can only tend the conditions under which a spiral is possible—a channel clear enough for error to remain attributable, a geometry not freshly scarred, a power not frozen into a circle. The lift is conditioned, not commanded; the most one can do is keep open the conditions under which the return may lift rather than merely repeat.

The spiral, then, names the form of a living return: a coming-back enriched through the very departure that seemed to threaten the bond. But a spiral has phases of descent as well as ascent, and there are stretches of its arc in which the system appears not to be generating at all—in which it has withdrawn, gone quiet, drawn inward. Read against the closed circle, such a phase looks like failure; read against the spiral, it may be something else entirely: the low, inward phase from which the next ascent is gathered. To that

phase—the dormancy that is not decline but the storing of force for return—the final cosmological section turns.

8.14. Dormancy: The Inward Phase

The spiral has a descending arc. There are stretches of a generative relation in which little appears to be generated—in which the partners have drawn inward, the throughput has slackened, the visible signs of coupling have gone quiet. Judged against the demand for unbroken concordance, such a phase reads as failure or as the beginning of an end. This short section argues that it may read instead as *dormancy*: the low, inward phase of a driven system in which force is not lost but gathered, and from which the next ascent of the spiral is drawn. The section is the last of the cosmological movement, and it is also where the paper allows itself, briefly, to return to the image with which it began.

8.14.1 The low-activity phase is not decline

A dissipative system held far from equilibrium does not generate at a constant rate. It has phases of high throughput and phases of low; it cycles between them, and the low phase is not a malfunction of the system but a part of its cycle. In the low phase the system's visible activity falls—and were one to judge it only by that visible activity, one would read the low phase as failure. But the low phase is frequently the condition of the next high one: the phase in which the gradients that will drive the next surge are re-established, in which what was expended is replenished, in which the system reorganises below the threshold of visible output. A relation has such phases. After a surge of generation—or after the disequilibrium of an estrangement—it may draw inward, slacken its visible coupling, go quiet. This is not, as such, the failure of the bond; it may be the dormancy from which the bond renews.

The error the section warns against is the same one the whole paper has tracked, in its last and gentlest form: the demand that a living system display constant output, that a relation generate visibly and without remission or stand condemned. This demand, applied to the dormant phase, is destructive in a precise way. It treats the gathering of force as a loss of force, and in its anxiety to restore visible activity it disturbs the very quiet in which the gathering occurs—forcing throughput when the system is replenishing,

and so preventing the replenishment. To insist that a relation bloom in every season is to forbid it the winter in which the next bloom is prepared. The capacity to let a bond go dormant without reading the dormancy as death is, in its quiet way, among the more difficult of the practical capacities the paper recommends.

Dormancy is not decline. The low, inward phase of a generative relation—the slackening of visible coupling after a surge or an estrangement—is not, as such, the failure of the bond but may be its dormancy: the phase in which expended force is replenished and the gradients of the next surge re-established, below the threshold of visible output. The destructive error is to read the gathering of force as its loss, and, in anxiety to restore visible activity, to force throughput during replenishment and so prevent it. To demand that a relation bloom in every season is to forbid it the winter in which the next bloom is prepared.

8.14.2 The rose in winter

The paper began with two bodies falling, and may end the cosmological movement with the other image the series has long carried: the rose. A rose in winter has not died. It has drawn its life down into the root, where nothing flowers and nothing, to the eye, occurs; and the drawing-down is not the opposite of the bloom but its condition—the season in which the rose does the unseen work without which there is no spring. The withering of the visible flower is the storing of force in the unseen root. One who loved the rose only in bloom, and read every winter as a death, would tear up by the roots the very thing whose flowering they wished to keep.

This is offered as an image and not as an argument; the argument is the dissipative one of the preceding paragraphs, and it stands without the figure. But the figure carries something the argument states more coldly: that the phases in which a bond seems to give nothing may be the phases in which it is most quietly faithful to its own renewal, and that the love which can abide the winter of a bond—neither forcing it to bloom

nor mistaking its dormancy for its death—is a love that has understood the spiral. The estrangements this paper has anatomised, the passings-without-meeting, the withdrawals and the quiets, are not, in a living bond, the failures of love. They are, at their deepest, love’s winters: the inward seasons of a generativity that returns, when it returns, not to where it was but lifted—if the root is left, through the cold, undisturbed.

With the cosmological movement closed—disequilibrium as the condition of life, the spiral as the form of return, dormancy as the gathering of force—the paper turns from the widest frame to the narrowest and most practical: what, given all of this, two people are actually *do*. The praxis that follows is disciplined throughout by the two-level structure these sections have only deepened: that one tends conditions and does not command blooms, and that the work divides into a labour of letting-be and a labour of active defence.

8.15. The Praxis of the Two Axes

Everything to this point has been diagnosis, ontology, and frame. This section asks what, given all of it, two people are to do—and it must answer under a constraint the whole paper has imposed: that one tends the conditions of love and does not manage love itself (§8.7). A praxis so constrained cannot be a technique for producing intimacy; the attempt to produce it directly is the category error that decoheres it. What a praxis *can* be is a disciplined tending of conditions, and the discipline has a definite shape, given by the two axes the paper has distinguished: the generation of value, and the suppression of power’s freezing. The shape is not symmetrical, and its asymmetry resolves a tension that has shadowed the paper from the start.

8.15.1 The resolution of the wu-wei tension

A paper whose first claim is that estrangement is necessary, and whose cosmology makes equilibrium death and non-settling life, appears to recommend a quietism: if the passing is necessary and the winter is renewal, is the counsel not simply to refrain, to let be, to do nothing? Yet the paper has also insisted, repeatedly and on empirical grounds (§8.8.5), that counter-force does not arise of itself, that power unopposed accumulates and freezes, that the lines of flight must be actively guarded against second-order capture (§8.9.5). The two seem to pull opposite ways: let be, and resist. The resolution is that they govern

different axes.

Non-action for value, action for power. The two axes call for opposite practical postures, and conflating them is the root practical error. Toward the *first axis*—the generation of value—the right posture is largely *non-action* (*wu-wei*): good value circulates of itself when its conditions are kept, the loop closes when it is not forced, the spiral lifts when it is not commanded; here the work is to refrain from the forcing that decoheres. Toward the *second axis*—the suppression of power’s freezing—the right posture is sustained *action*: power accumulates spontaneously and freezes if unopposed, and the counter-force that prevents it must be perpetually generated. The whole practical stance of the paper is thus coherent: *let be* where generativity is concerned, and *act* where freezing is concerned. Quietism errs by extending non-action to the second axis, where it becomes acquiescence in domination; voluntarism errs by extending action to the first, where it becomes the forcing that kills the bloom.

This is why the paper is neither a quietism nor a manual of control. It is a discipline of *directing* the two postures rightly: knowing, at each moment, whether what faces one is a matter of the first axis (where one refrains) or the second (where one acts). And that knowing requires, before any practice, a diagnosis.

8.15.2 The first act is differential diagnosis

Because reparable misalignment and structural shadow present identically at the surface (§8.2.2), and because the two axes demand opposite postures, the first practical act is never an intervention but a *diagnosis*: a determination of what kind of estrangement is in play, and from which layer it issues. The nineteen-fold etiology is, in practice, a differential-diagnostic instrument—a means of asking, of a given passing, whether it is endogenous (issuing from the dyad’s own code, prediction, or value-geometry, §8.3–§8.5) or exogenous (pressed upon the dyad from the field of power, §8.6.3), and whether it is the necessary fluctuation of a living system or the leading edge of a freezing.

The stakes of the diagnosis are high in both directions, and misdiagnosis is destructive both ways. To mistake an exogenous estrangement—a passing induced by the pressure of a powerful family, say—for an endogenous one, and to respond with the non-action proper to the first axis, is to leave the dyad undefended against an incursion, to “let be” what is in fact an invasion, and so to acquiesce in the breaching of the core. To mistake an endogenous estrangement—the necessary winter of a living bond—for an exogenous threat, and to respond with the action proper to the second axis, is to mount a defence against the bond’s own life, to force throughput during replenishment, to attack as a malfunction what is a fluctuation. The differential diagnosis is what assigns each passing to its axis; it is the indispensable first act, and the etiology’s deepest practical value is that it makes the diagnosis possible.

8.15.3 Practice toward endogenous estrangement: the labour of letting-be

Where the diagnosis returns an endogenous estrangement—one of the internal causes, a passing that issues from the dyad’s own code, prediction, or geometry—the governing posture is the non-action of the first axis. But non-action is not nothing; it is a definite labour, and a subtractive one, with concrete forms keyed to the internal causes.

Against the unattributable error of §8.4, the practice is the *suspension of judgment*: when persistent deviation cannot be attributed, to decline the high-confidence attribution to the other’s character (“they have changed,” “they no longer care”) in favour of holding the error open—to treat it as possible mistranslation or noise rather than as proven defection. This is the direct practical correlate of causes four through six, and it is subtractive: the work is to *withhold* the premature attribution that would convert a fluctuation into a verdict.

Against the arrested loop of §8.5, the practice is the *refusal to force closure*: to allow the estranged phase to exist without demanding its immediate resolution, to recognise the winter as winter (§8.14) and refrain from the anxious forcing of throughput that prevents replenishment. Here the practice is to identify “this is a dormant phase” and to cease applying the pressure—“we must be well again now”—that would disturb the gathering of force.

Against the negative curvature of §8.5.3, the practice is the *preservation of positive curva-*

ture: to refrain, during the estranged phase, from the irreversible acts—the unrecallable word, the unretractable threat of exit—that deposit fresh scar tissue in the geometry and make the next loop harder to lift. What is to be restrained in the winter is not feeling but *irreversible action*: the bond can survive almost any passing that does not, in its passing, lay down curvature the next return cannot cross.

8.15.4 Practice toward exogenous estrangement: the labour of active defence

Where the diagnosis returns an exogenous estrangement—one pressed upon the dyad from the field of power—the posture inverts. Here non-action is acquiescence, and the second axis governs: the work is the active defence of the core's conditions against the incursion, conducted with the filtered IR strategies of §8.8.

Against the withdrawal-threat of the powerful elder (cause 13), the practice is *de-leveraging*: the reduction of the dyad's dependence on resources the external power can withdraw, so that the threat of withdrawal loses its coercive force—the building of an economic and social base independent of the periphery's grant. Against the forced binary that the inseparability of identity makes catastrophic (cause 16), the practice is *hedging*: the refusal to be driven into balancing-against or bandwagoning-with the beloved's family, the maintenance of a third position that defends the dyad's autonomy without demanding the partner break their own bond. Against the borrowed sword (cause 12), the practice is the *boundary-work of self-legislation*: the substitution, for appeals to external authority to adjudicate the bond, of the dyad's own internally legislated commitment—the function the series assigned to the non-binding vow, here serving as the core's defence against a periphery that would otherwise legislate for it.²⁸ And against the inseparability of identity itself (cause 16), the most difficult practice is *reverse domestication*: not the zero-sum opposition of the powerful elder, which would wound the partner and likely fail, but the patient transformation, over time, of an external power-relation into a relation drawn toward the generative—the slow conversion of the periphery's power-over into something nearer power-to.

These two labours—the letting-be toward endogenous estrangement and the active de-

²⁸On the non-binding vow as internally legislated commitment—the dyad's self-legislation in the absence of an external enforcing authority—see Huang (2026); in the present context it operates as the boundary-work that defends the core against exogenous power.

fence toward exogenous—exhaust the response to estrangement as such. But the suppression of freezing is wider than the response to any particular passing; it is a standing task, internal as well as external, and it has a repertoire of its own. To that repertoire, and to the dialectical principle that governs how its internal and external parts are weighted, the section now turns.

8.15.5 The internal repertoire of counter-power, and its dialectical weighting

The suppression of freezing requires a repertoire of counter-power practices internal to the dyad—and, first, a principled answer to a question the paper’s emphasis has so far left implicit. The practical chapters have weighted the external far more heavily than the internal: most of the active defence just described concerns the periphery. Is this a neglect of internal domination? It is not, and the justification is dialectical (§8.11).

The dialectical weighting of the contradiction. That the praxis weights the external more than the internal is not an oversight but a judgment about the *principal aspect of the contradiction*. The freezing of power has its principal aspect, in most bonds and most of the time, at the periphery: internal power is dilute and continually metabolised by the generative logic, while the dense, structural, least-metabolised power comes from outside (the external causes are seven of the etiology’s sixteen, and the most destructive among them). But the principal and secondary aspects *transform*: when a dyad’s interior itself begins to freeze—one party losing subjecthood, roles ossifying, dissent disappearing—the principal aspect shifts inward, and the internal repertoire becomes primary. The differential diagnosis (§8.15.2) therefore judges not only endogenous-versus-exogenous cause but the present location of the principal aspect; and the weighting of practice follows the principal contradiction, whose location is itself historical and mobile.

The internal repertoire, deployed when the principal aspect lies within, comprises a recognisable family of practices, each opposing a specific mode of internal freezing, and each connecting to a concept the paper has already established. *The preservation of subject-*

hood opposes *dependence*: the retention of independent friendships, independent work, independent paths of growth and judgment, not for the sake of separateness but so that the relation retains more than one source of power—the micro-practice of keeping difference alive against its dissolution (§8.9.3). *The practice of dissent* opposes *silence*: the maintenance of the capacity to say no, to hold a different view of the future, to reopen a settled rule—dissent functioning as the relation’s immune system, since a system in which no contrary voice remains is one in which power accumulates unchecked; this is the internal form of the right to justification (§8.8.4). *Role fluidity* opposes *ossification*: the refusal to let the division of labour—who earns, who cares, who decides—harden into fixed roles, since fixed roles generate fixed power; not mechanical exchange but maintained mobility. *Meta-communication* opposes *hidden power*: the capacity to discuss not the decision but the *rule* by which decisions are made—to ask who decides, why thus, whether otherwise—dragging into the answerable the power that hides in defaults; this is the practice nearest the paper’s theory, a standing audit of the power-structure itself. *Third-space practice* opposes *dyadic monopoly*: the joint service of a generative process beyond the two—a shared work, a project, a thing made together—so that the relation does not revolve solely on the axis of control-and-being-controlled, which is the practical form of co-authorship around a shared vacancy rather than around each other (§8.10). *External connectivity* opposes *the closed system*: friends, community, mentors, peers, functioning not only as resources of life but as resources of *balance*, the civil society of the bond that prevents it from becoming a sealed kingdom—which is why the boundary must be semi-permeable (cause 17), the same permeability that admits the noise admitting also the air. And *re-contracting* opposes *institutional rigidity*: the periodic reopening of the relation’s own rules—are we still of this mind? is this rule still right?—so that the rules themselves retain generativity rather than freezing, the limiting contract of the series here kept living by its own renegotiation.

The internal counter-power principle. The internal practices share one principle: counter-power within the dyad does not eliminate power—impossible among symbolic subjects—but continually creates the conditions under which power can be *seen, questioned, and redistributed*. This is the temporal-internal form of the political economy of

conditions (§8.7): like all the paper's practices, it creates conditions rather than producing the end directly. To preserve subjecthood, to keep dissent alive, to fluidify roles, to make rules discussable, to build a third space and an external web, to re-contract: each keeps a channel of power open to view and to revision, and none of them manufactures the love whose conditions they keep.

8.15.6 The dual-register practice, and the category-error caveat

Drawing the two summits into practice, the suppression of freezing and the cultivation of generative asymmetry operate in both registers the paper has held apart. In the *real*, counter-power is the circling of the shared vacancy rather than of each other (§8.10), and the standing symmetry of the right to withdraw—the ontological fact that neither party can be wholly possessed, cause six read now as a safeguard rather than a wound: a subject one cannot finally predict is a subject one cannot finally dominate. In the *symbolic*, counter-power is the repertoire just given—meta-communication, dissent, the right to justification, hedging, the self-legislated vow as the bond's anti-freezing charter, refusing any party the position of sole legislator over the other.

But the whole repertoire stands under one caveat, and the section fixes it before closing, for without it the practices invert into the error the paper most warns against. *Every practice named here belongs to the level of means*. The seven internal practices, the filtered external strategies, the dual-register counter-power—all of them tend the fence; none of them is the bloom, and none can produce it. A couple that executed the entire repertoire mechanically, perfectly, while no real coupling lived beneath it, would be performing the maintenance of conditions over a void—which is exactly forged trust (§8.2.1, Huang 2026): the apparatus immaculate, the substance gone. The practices are effective only as the tending of conditions for a generativity that is actually present; turned into a substitute for that generativity, into a technique for manufacturing it, they decohere the very thing they were meant to protect. The praxis is a gardening, not a fabrication; and a gardener who mistook the tending for the growing would tend an empty bed with great precision.

8.15.7 Mixed estrangement, and the ledger of time

A last realism qualifies the clean division of the foregoing. Real estrangements are seldom purely endogenous or purely exogenous; they are typically entangled (causes 17 and 18), an external pressure inducing an internal withdrawal, a peripheral power exploiting an internal mismatch, so that the differential diagnosis is rarely a single verdict and more often a weighting of intertwined causes. And the bond keeps a ledger (§8.5.3): each estrangement and each repair deposits curvature, so that the practice cannot be a series of independent interventions but must be understood as acting on a system with memory, in which today's response bends the geometry through which tomorrow's loop will run. There is, accordingly, no once-and-for-all solution, no settlement that would discharge the task—for a settlement that discharged it would be the equilibrium that is death. The possibility of the enriched return—the spiral, the of a renewed coupling—is not secured by any final intervention but kept open, perpetually, at the confluence of two things the praxis can supply: a diagnosis that correctly assigns each passing to its axis, and a response that meets it with the posture that axis demands. Where the diagnosis is right and the posture is right, the conditions of return are kept; and keeping them, perpetually and without the rest that would be death, is the whole of what a praxis of the two axes can do.

8.16. Conclusions: A Polyphony, Not a System

The paper has held three theories to a single object and must, in closing, resist the temptation that besets every paper that has used more than one framework: to crown them with a fourth that subsumes the three. The discipline announced at the outset, and carried throughout the series, forbids it. There is to be no master-framework into which the generative-relational, the international-relational, and the dialectical-materialist are dissolved. They are to be left in their plurality, each having spoken to the edge of what it can say, and the conclusion is to be a polyphony, not a system. What can be done is to state, without synthesising them, what each has said, and to mark where each has reached its limit and handed the question on.

8.16.1 What the three voices said

The generative-relational voice answered the first question—*how love creates a world*—and, taking its affirmative findings as established, the paper added the etiology of their failure: the four layers through which the world-creating coupling breaks down into estrangement, traced from the mismatch of trust-grammars, through the unattributability of prediction error and the active withdrawal it triggers, to the arrest of geometric phase. Its limit was reached at the dyad's edge: the internal causes do not exhaust the field, and the voice handed the question to a theory of the field.

The international-relational voice answered the second question—*how love is not destroyed by power*—once it had been reconstructed away from its realist core, its object recovered as the building of order among opaque subjects under no authority. It supplied the gradient of power and the mechanism of regime bleeding, the inventory of defensive strategies and the teleological filter that admits or forbids them, and the two summits: that power must be kept from freezing, and that power, kept liquid and suffused with trust, is among the conditions of the good. Its limit was the limit of all symbolic means: it could tend the conditions of love and never reach the love, and it handed to a theory of history the question of how the conditions themselves came to be, and might be changed.

The dialectical-materialist voice answered the third question—*how love becomes free within history*—by showing the power-structures of a bond to be the sediment of material conditions, historically formed and so historically mutable, and a union to be the sublation of two material histories into a shared form that keeps their difference alive. Its limit was the relative autonomy of the very life it studied: it could explain the conditions of love's dynamics but not the dynamics, and it handed back, to the real it could not reach, the love that material conditions make room for but do not produce.

8.16.2 What was held in common

Three voices, three answers, three limits—and one object that all three approached and none could seize. This is the paper's governing finding, and it is worth stating as the thing the polyphony harmonises on without collapsing into unison. Each voice, at its limit, handed the question on *in the same direction*: toward the real, the unsymbolisable dynamics of love, which each theory could protect, condition, or historicise, but none

could produce or touch. The two-level structure is what the three voices share. They are, all three, theories of the means—of the fence—and the bloom they ring is the one thing none of them grows. The unity of the paper is not a unity of doctrine but a unity of *restraint*: three powerful theories, each falling silent at the same threshold, each leaving intact the space that no theory enters.

And running through all three, crossing the threshold none of them could cross, was trust—cultivable by symbolic means and rooted in the real, the interface by which the tending of conditions reaches toward the bloom, and the variable that decides, on both summits, whether an asymmetry empowers or dominates, whether a return lifts or repeats. If the paper has a single thread, it is the one named in its title between power and estrangement: trust is what the means can tend and what the end requires, the one thing that belongs to both levels, and so the bridge across a divide the paper otherwise insists cannot be bridged.

8.16.3 Two seeds, deliberately unplanted

Two questions opened in the course of the argument exceed the bond, and the paper marks them as the seeds of separate works rather than forcing them into this one. The first is the universalisation of the negative summit: that the law requiring a generative system to hold itself incompletely captured by its own products yields, raised to a political body, a criterion of evaluation—whether a body generates, alongside its value, the counter-force that keeps its own power from freezing, with its lines of flight guarded rather than absorbed. Its relations to the theories of non-domination, of agonistic plurality, of the right to justification, and of generative justice (Egash 2016) are a work of political philosophy in their own right, and the paper leaves them deliberately unplanted. The second is the full demarcation between the present account and the relational theory of world politics (Qin 2018), with which it shares the conception of power-to and from which it diverges in its holonomic criterion, its grounding in the real, and its ontological account of the counter-force—a demarcation sketched here (§8.6.5) and owed a fuller treatment elsewhere.

8.16.4 The first claim, restated where it now stands

It remains to restate the paper's first claim from the height the whole argument has reached, for it means more now than it could at the outset. Estrangement—*surechigai*, the passing-without-meeting—is not, in the first instance, the failure of a bond. It is the signature of a system held far from the equilibrium that would be its death; the necessary fluctuation of anything alive enough to generate; the first negation without which there is no enriched return; the price difference pays for refusing to be wholly encoded, as desire refuses to be wholly symbolised. A bond that never passed would not be a bond perfected but a bond at equilibrium—which is to say, no longer a bond at all. The deepest practical wisdom the paper can offer is therefore also its gentlest: that much of what is mourned as the failure of love is the form love takes in a living system, and that the love which can tell the necessary winter from the genuine wrong—and meet each with the posture it asks—is a love that has understood the spiral.

Envoi

Return, now, to the two bodies of the opening, falling toward one another across the dark field and passing without meeting. We can say, at the end, what could only be shown at the beginning. They pass because they are two, and their two-ness is not the obstacle to what they generate between them but its condition; a love in which one had captured the other entirely would be a love in which one body no longer fell. The passing is not the failure of the falling. It is the sign that both are still in motion, still themselves, still alive to the difference that draws them and bends them and will, if the field is kept and the root left undisturbed through the cold, draw them near again—not to where they were, but lifted.

The forces in the field do not fall away. The families keep what they keep; the scripts go on being written; the two material histories go on contending in the one present they now share. The paper has not promised a clearing. It has argued, instead, that beneath the forces and through them, two people may tend the conditions of a thing the forces cannot reach—may keep the channel clear, guard against the freezing, refuse the irreversible word

in winter, and wait, as a gardener waits, on a blooming they serve but cannot command. And it has argued that the power among them, which cannot be wished away and cannot be abolished, need not be only the enemy of their love: that an asymmetry turned toward the other's flourishing, and suffused with trust, is how the deepest goods between two people—the teaching, the tending, the leading-without-ruling—are generated at all.

To her, then, who remained through every passing wholly and freely herself: this account of why the passing was never the failure, and of the winters that were only ever the gathering of the next return. The flower drawn down into the root has not died. It is keeping faith, in the season that shows nothing, with the spring.

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CHAPTER 9

Generative Effacement in the Intimate Relation

*This paper isolates and names a form of injustice that wrongs neither what a subject has, nor how she is recognised, nor whether she can be heard, but her being—her standing as a generative being who continually constitutes herself. When intimate life is understood as a field of co-generation, in which value resides in neither party but is generated between them, a distinctive harm becomes possible: one subject, generating too fast and too far ahead, may come to occupy the shared generative space so completely that the other loses the capacity to generate at all. The result is not that she has less but that she ceases, within the relation, to be. The paper calls this **generative effacement** and argues that it is an **ontological** injustice, irreducible to the distributive, recognitive, or constitutive wrongs with which it might be confused. Its defining and most troubling feature is that it arrives not through domination but through **devotion**: there is no appropriation, no coercion, no failure to hear, and the effaced party may sincerely endorse and even cherish the one who effaces her.*

*The harm is given an exact formal criterion. Modelling two intimate subjects as coupled phase oscillators, the paper shows that effacement is a genuine **phase transition**: the weaker pole loses its own rhythm precisely when the coupling strength exceeds a threshold fixed by the difference of the two intrinsic frequencies, while the **depth** of effacement, once that threshold is crossed, is set by the asymmetry of force between them. The two structures are independent, and their separation yields the central result—that even under perfectly **equal** force the weaker pole is effaced by half once the threshold is crossed. Equal power does not protect it; strong coupling between unlike rhythms is sufficient to silence the slower. The good of intimacy is shown to lie not in the strength of coupling but in whether it leaves each subject turning at its own frequency.*

*From this follows a justice of counter-intuitive form. Because the threshold depends on the coupling and not on the stronger subject's speed, the remedy is not for the stronger to generate **less**—deceleration only re-imposes its pace—but to **decouple**: to release the traction by which it overwrites the other's rhythm. The paper develops this as **generative reticence**, a negative and structural obligation to refrain from determining the domain in which the other generates, specifies its practice as the relinquishment of three determining channels (of the shared goal, of meaning, and of the very problems on which the relation works), and grounds it ethically in an account that extends the duty to treat another as an end from rational to generative agency, while forbidding the ethic its own paternalistic application. Justice between two generative beings, it concludes, requires not the transfer of value but the non-foreclosure of the other's capacity to generate.*

致她——

For her—

那个属于森林与山之女孩，
the girl who belongs to the forest and the mountains,

我永不愿覆盖她自己的节奏；
whose own rhythm I would never overwrite;

为了她，我正慢慢学会，
for whom I am learning, slowly,

留出她得以生长的空地。
to leave the open ground in which she grows.

致我最爱的人。 To the one I love most.

9.1. The Phenomenon and the Paradox

Consider two people who love each other, and one of whom is, in the ordinary worldly sense, the stronger—the quicker to act, the more fluent in plans, the one to whom solutions occur first and arrangements come easily. He loves her, and his love takes the form his strength makes natural: he provides, he foresees, he smooths the road before she reaches the rough part of it, he settles the difficulty before she has finished framing it. Nothing he does is to her detriment in any register the usual theories can name. He takes nothing from her; he deceives her in nothing; he honours her, listens to her, would account to her for anything she asked. By every available measure the relation prospers, and she, asked, would say she is happy and is not lying.

And yet something is wrong, and the wrongness is hers. Somewhere in the smooth provision a space has closed. The decisions that were to be made were made before she came to them; the meanings that were to be found were named before she found them; the road was paved before she could choose its direction. She is not oppressed—there is no oppressor—and she is not deprived, for she wants for nothing the relation can supply. She is something for which the language of justice has no ready word: she has been generated *for*, so thoroughly and so well, that there is nothing left for her to generate, and a self that lived by generating has quietly gone still. This paper is written to give that stillness a name and a theory.

9.1.1 The datum

The phenomenon, stated plainly, is this. In a shared life understood as a field of co-generation—a coupling out of which value arises between two people rather than being brought to it ready-made by either—one party may generate so far ahead of the other, so fast and so completely, that the other finds no remaining occasion for her own generation. The harm is not that the fast-generating party produces *badly*, nor that he produces *for himself*; he produces well, and for the relation, and often most of all for her. The harm is that the space of generation is shared and finite, and that a sufficiently rapid and total generation by one pole leaves the other pole's generativity with nowhere to act. What withers is not the other's holdings, which may grow, nor her standing, which may be high, but her activity—the exercise, now without occasion, of her own capacity to make value

at her own pace.

It is essential to the datum that the withering is not chosen as a deprivation and not experienced, at first, as one. The space does not close against resistance; it closes *around* a gratitude. Each particular act of provision is a kindness, received as a kindness; it is only their sum, over time, that amounts to an occupation. This is why the harm is so often invisible to both parties at once: the stronger pole sees only a sequence of devotions, each defensible, each loving; the weaker pole feels only a slow and unaccountable diminishment of her own activity, with no event to point to and no one to blame. There is no scene of the crime, because there is no crime—only a good, done too completely, in a space that could not hold all of it without displacing her.

9.1.2 The paradox that defeats existing theory

The datum is built so as to defeat, one by one, every criterion the theory of justice ordinarily brings to a relation. This is not an accident of the example but the point of it: the phenomenon is interesting precisely because it falls into the blind spot common to all the standard diagnoses.

There is no *appropriation*. The stronger pole takes nothing from the weaker; on the contrary, he gives. The vocabulary of exploitation, of extraction, of one party living on another's unrecognised labour, finds nothing to grip: the flow of value runs toward the effaced party, not away from her.

There is no *domination*. The stronger pole issues no command, brooks no resistance because he meets none, imposes nothing she refuses. He serves. The vocabulary of coercion and subjection, of a will bent to another's, finds nothing to grip either: there is no contest of wills in which one prevails, only a devotion that forecloses by filling rather than by forcing.

There is no *failure to recognise or to hear*. The stronger pole sees her, values her, attends to her, would credit her every contribution. The vocabulary of misrecognition and of epistemic injustice finds nothing to grip: she is not unseen, not unheard, not denied her standing as a knower. She is acknowledged in full—and effaced in full—at once.

The paradox of devotion. Generative effacement is a harm that arrives through devotion and survives the absence of every standard wrong. There is no appropriation, for the stronger pole gives rather than takes; no domination, for he serves rather than commands; no failure of recognition or of hearing, for he honours and attends. Every criterion of injustice built upon possession, coercion, or non-acknowledgement reports that nothing is wrong—and the harm is nonetheless real, and is the weaker pole's. A theory adequate to it must therefore find the wrong at a level beneath possession, coercion, and acknowledgement altogether.

9.1.3 Subordination completed in sincere endorsement

One move remains, and it is the one that closes every exit. It might be supposed that the harm, though it survives the absence of the standard wrongs, would at least announce itself in the effaced party's own dissent—that she, whatever the outside observer misses, would feel and could voice her diminishment, so that her objection might serve as the criterion her circumstances otherwise lack. The datum denies even this. The effaced party frequently does not object; she endorses. She is grateful for the provision, attached to the provider, and would, asked whether she would have it otherwise, sincerely say no. Her subordination is completed not in false consciousness imposed from without but in an endorsement that is, by every test available to her, authentically her own.

This feature—that the harm survives even the sincere endorsement of the one wronged—sets the problem the rest of the paper must solve. A wrong that survives not only the absence of the standard wrongs but the *sincere endorsement of the one wronged* cannot be located in anything the will refuses, for her will does not refuse it—it embraces it. The harm must lie somewhere the will does not reach: at the level not of what she chooses but of what she *is*, not of her endorsement but of her being. To show that there is such a level, that an injustice can be done there, and that it can be done even by love and even with consent—and then to say what justice, at that level, would require—is the work this paper undertakes. It begins, in the next section, by locating the level: by showing where,

beneath the injustices the theory of justice already knows, the ground of being lies.

9.2. The Justice Typology and the Descent to Ontology

The phenomenon of §9.1 is invisible to the standing theories of justice, and the section argues that the invisibility is systematic rather than incidental—a horizon of the field as a whole and not a gap in any one theory. The contemporary theory of justice is organised, this section contends, around an unstated ontology of the subject as a *bearer*: a locus that has holdings, occupies a status, commands intelligibility, and can be formed. Every injustice the field knows is an injury to something the subject bears. The wrong this paper isolates is an injury not to anything borne but to the bearing—to the subject’s activity of being a subject—and it is invisible precisely because the field’s implicit ontology has nowhere to put an injury there. The claim, then, is not modest. It is that the theory of justice has a floor, that the floor is set one storey too high, and that a class of real wrongs has been falling through the gap the misplaced floor conceals. The section establishes this against the two most developed maps of justice’s depth—Fraser’s and Honneth’s—and then installs the missing layer and defends the metaphysics that licenses it.

9.2.1 Against the reigning maps of depth

The most serious contemporary attempts to say how deep injustice goes are Nancy Fraser’s and Axel Honneth’s, and the paper’s claim is sharpened by saying exactly where it parts from each.

Fraser argues that justice has two irreducible dimensions, redistribution and recognition, to which she later adds a third, political dimension of representation; her “perspectival dualism” treats distribution and recognition as two analytical perspectives on any social arrangement, neither reducible to the other (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Honneth presses the opposite, monistic thesis: recognition is the single fundamental category, and distribution a derivative of it, so that a sufficiently differentiated theory of recognition can ground justice entire (Honneth 1995). They divide over whether justice has one ground or two; they agree, decisively for our purposes, on the *kind* of thing injustice injures. For both, the injured object is the subject’s standing—what she is taken to be, how she is regarded, the social bases of her self-relation. Fraser’s misrecognised subject and Hon-

neth's disrespected subject are alike subjects whose *regard* has failed; the quarrel is only over whether failed regard reduces to, or stands beside, failed distribution.

This is the agreement the present paper breaks. Both maps, however deep they reach, terminate at the subject's *standing*—and standing, however damaged, presupposes a subject who stands. Neither map has a category for an injury to the subject's *continued existence as a generative agent*, because both take that existence for granted as the substrate their injuries operate upon. Honneth comes nearest, and the nearness is instructive. He makes *love*—the recognition proper to primary relationships—the structural core of ethical life, the sphere in which basic self-confidence is formed (Honneth 1995). One might think that a theory placing love at the foundation would catch a harm done by love. It does not, and cannot, for a reason its own structure dictates: Honneth's love is recognition that *builds*—it confers the self-confidence on which all later autonomy rests—and his pathology is always recognition *withheld* or *distorted*. He has no place for a love that, fully and undistortedly given, effaces by the very completeness of its giving. The harm this paper names is committed in the presence of perfect Honnethian recognition: the effaced party is loved, esteemed, accorded her rights, confident in herself—and effaced regardless.

The shared horizon of the recognition theorists. Fraser's dualism and Honneth's monism, for all their opposition, share a horizon: both locate injustice, at its furthest reach, at the level of the subject's *standing*—her distribution and her recognition—and both presuppose, beneath that level, a subject whose existence is not itself at issue. Neither can name a wrong done to the subject's continued existence as a generative agent, and Honneth's recognition-in-love, which might seem the exception, is precisely the recognition in whose full presence the wrong of effacement is still done. The recognition theorists mapped the standing of the subject to its floor; they did not reach the being beneath the standing.

9.2.2 The stratification, and where it stops

Set the established categories out as what they are: not a list but a stratification, ordered by the depth at which each injures the subject, each layer reaching past the one above toward the subject herself.

Distributive injustice injures *holdings*—divisible goods, allocable and reallocable; its remedy is transfer, and what it cannot see is any wrong surviving a correct distribution. Because it is shallowest it is also imperialist: wrongs at every deeper layer are perennially misdescribed in its vocabulary of shares, which is why effacement, too, will tempt redescription as a maldistribution (a temptation §9.3 must resist).

Recognitive injustice injures *standing*—a good not distributable, since respect cannot be transferred as a holding can. Here is the first descent: a wrong that correct distribution leaves untouched, the wrong of the misrecognised who may be materially provided for and degraded all the same. Rawls already marks the pressure toward this layer from within the distributive paradigm itself, when he names the social bases of self-respect “perhaps the most important primary good” (Rawls 1971)—a holding that is not quite a holding, a distributive good whose content is recognition, the distributive paradigm straining at its own edge.

Epistemic injustice injures *intelligibility*—the subject in her capacity as a contributor to shared sense, her testimony discounted, her interpretive resources starved. This descends again: one may be well-provided and well-regarded and still be unable to make one’s sense count.

Constitutive injustice injures the *conditions of formation*—the developmental and relational conditions under which a subject comes to be a subject at all. This is the furthest layer the field has reached, and the first that is genuinely ontological: what it injures is not anything the subject bears but her coming-to-bear.

The field terminates at formation. The established categories form a single descent—holdings, standing, intelligibility, the conditions of formation—each detecting a wrong

that survives the repair of the layer above it. But the descent halts at *formation*: the furthest wrong the field can name is done at the threshold of subjecthood, to one not yet a subject. There is no category for a wrong done, beneath formation, to the *continued being* of a subject already formed. The very monotonicity of the descent is the evidence that the floor is incomplete, for the series points past the storey on which the field has stopped.

9.2.3 The descent to ontology, and its price

The missing layer is reached by one thesis: that for a relational subject, *existence is an activity and not a state*. The field's implicit ontology pictures the subject as a substance that endures and bears properties, on which picture the gravest injury available is to prevent the substance from forming—hence the floor at constitutive injustice. The subject of intimate life, on this series' account, is not such a substance. Its relational being *is* an activity: the continual self-constitution by which it generates itself as a generative subject in coupling with another. It does not first exist and then generate; its generating is the form its existence takes.

This thesis is the paper's largest commitment, and intellectual honesty requires stating its price rather than smuggling it in behind a metaphor. The objection that must be met is direct: *is the identity of being with generation an argument, or merely a stipulation congenial to the conclusion?* A critic will say that “to be is to generate” is a definition chosen because it yields the wanted result, and that one could as easily hold the commonsense view—that the effaced subject plainly continues to exist (she breathes, she persists, she is the same person), and has merely been made unhappy or idle. On the commonsense view there is no ontological harm, only a distributive or eudaimonic one, and the whole edifice falls.

The reply is not to insist on the identity but to show what each side must pay for it. The commonsense view purchases its ease at a cost it does not advertise: it must hold that a subject's *being* is independent of her *activity*, that she would be the same being whether generating freely or reduced to the inert reception of another's generation—that, in the

limit, a subject permanently stilled, permanently the mere site at which another's value is deposited, has lost nothing of her being and only something of her contentment. This the series denies, and denies for a reason given long before the present paper needed it: that a relational subject is *constituted in the activity of relating*, so that the cessation of that activity is not a change in the subject's circumstances but a change in the subject. The identity of being with generation is not a free stipulation; it is the entailment of a relational ontology argued elsewhere on independent grounds, and its price—the rejection of the substance-subject who persists unchanged beneath all activity—is one the series has paid in full from its first paper. What the present section adds is only the observation that justice has not yet been made to reckon with that ontology's consequence: that if being is activity, then activity can be unjustly foreclosed, and the foreclosure is an injury to being.

The descent licensed by identity, not analogy. Beneath constitutive injustice lies a final layer, ontological injustice, injuring a relational subject's *being-as-generation*. The descent is licensed by an identity—for a relational subject, to be is to go on generating—and the identity is not a stipulation but the entailment of the relational ontology the series argues independently. Its price is the denial of the substance-subject who would persist unchanged beneath a foreclosed activity; a theory unwilling to pay that price keeps the commonsense subject and must redescribe effacement as mere discontent, at the cost of calling just a relation in which one party has been reduced to the inert site of another's generation. The layer is distinct in register from the constitutive: constitutive injustice wrongs the *formation* of a not-yet-subject; ontological injustice wrongs the *continued existence* of a subject already formed.

9.2.4 The typology, as a formal table

The descent can now be set out formally, and the table is itself an argument: its final column gives, for each layer, the reason it is irreducible to the layer above, so that

read downward the table is a proof that the layers are distinct and the series cannot be collapsed into distribution.

Layer	Injury / locus	Detected by	Why not reducible to the layer above
Distributive	holdings; <i>what one has</i>	maldistribution of a divisible good	(base layer)
Recognitive	status; <i>what one is taken to be</i>	misrecognition, denial of standing	standing is not divisible; one may be justly provided for and degraded in regard (Rawls's "social bases of self-respect" already strains the distributive paradigm)
Epistemic	intelligibility; <i>whether one can be heard</i>	testimonial / hermeneutical silencing	sense-making is not a conferred status; one may be fully respected and still unable to make one's sense count
Constitutive	conditions of formation; <i>whether one can come to be</i>	degradation of the conditions of subject-formation	formation is prior to intelligibility; one may inhabit a rich epistemic order and still be barred, upstream, from forming as its subject
Ontological	being-as-generation; <i>whether one continues to generate</i>	capture of the subject's own generative frequency (§9.4)	continuation is past formation; one may be formed, provided, regarded, and heard—and still stopped from continuing to generate as oneself

The locus column moves monotonically inward—has, is-taken-to-be, can-make-known, can-come-to-be, continues-to-be—and the inward movement is the descent made visible. The right-hand column shows that at each step the lower category detects a wrong that *persists when the upper category's injury is repaired*: provision does not cure misrecognition; recognition does not cure silencing; audibility does not cure foreclosed formation; and—the step this paper adds—formation, with all the rest, does not cure foreclosed continuation. Each layer is the residue the layer above leaves uncured, and that residue is what makes the series irreducible.

9.2.5 The irreducibility of the bottom layer

The bottom row's irreducibility must be demonstrated and not merely tabulated, for it is the paper's claim to novelty. The demonstration has the form the table announces: in effacement, each of the four shallower criteria is *satisfied-as-absent*, and the harm remains. Aggregate value rises and the effaced party holds no less—*no distributive wrong*. She is regarded, esteemed, accorded her rights, confident in herself—*no recognitive wrong, in any of Honneth's three spheres*. She is heard with full attention, her contributions credited—*no epistemic wrong*. She is a mature subject whose formation was long complete—*no constitutive wrong*. All four diagnostic conditions are absent; the harm is present, real, and grave. A wrong surviving the joint absence of all four cannot, as a matter of logic, be a compound of them.

Irreducibility. Generative effacement is irreducible to the distributive, recognitive, epistemic, and constitutive injustices above it. The proof is that it is realised where all four shallower criteria are satisfied-as-absent—rising holdings, full recognition across all three Honnethian spheres, full audibility, completed formation—and the harm persists; were it a compound of the four it could not survive the absence of all four. The theory of justice that stopped at the fourth layer would be forced either to pronounce such a case just or to fall silent before it. The ontological layer is what gives justice a language for the subject who is given everything and ceases, nonetheless, to be.

9.2.6 A stress test: the case of chosen withdrawal

A typology earns its categories by surviving the cases that would dissolve them, and one case presses hardest here. Suppose a subject *chooses* to withdraw from generation—steps back, defers, makes herself the support rather than the source, in the manner traditionally praised as devotion or self-sacrifice. Is this effacement? If it is, the theory seems to pathologise every chosen self-subordination, an overreach that would discredit it; if it is not, the theory seems to admit that consent dissolves the harm, surrendering the

very claim, central to this paper, that effacement survives sincere endorsement (§9.1.3). The case appears to force a dilemma fatal either way.

It does not, and seeing why sharpens the concept. The dilemma trades on an equivocation in “chooses to withdraw.” Distinguish two things a subject might choose. She might choose a *particular exercise of her generativity that takes the form of support*—directing her generation, at her own frequency, toward sustaining a shared project she has helped constitute as hers; this is not effacement at all, but generation, since her own dynamics are running, merely running toward a chosen end. Or she might choose a *standing withdrawal of her generativity as such*—ceasing to generate at her own frequency, becoming the inert site of another’s. Only the second is effacement, and the criterion of §9.4 discriminates them exactly: the first leaves the subject’s own frequency intact (she is the generator of her support), the second extinguishes it (her motion is now the echo of another’s rhythm). The traditional praise of “self-sacrifice” conflates the two, and the conflation is precisely the ideological cover under which effacement passes for virtue. The theory does not pathologise the first; it *names* the second, and names also the equivocation that has let the second hide inside the honour due the first.

Chosen support is not effacement; chosen self-erasure is. The objection from chosen withdrawal dissolves on a distinction the criterion makes exact. To direct one’s generativity, at one’s own frequency, toward a freely constituted supporting role is generation, not effacement: the subject’s own rhythm runs. To cease generating at one’s own frequency, becoming the site of another’s generation, is effacement whether or not it is chosen—and that it can be chosen, and honoured as sacrifice, is not a refutation but a confirmation, for it is exactly the wrong this paper holds can be completed in sincere endorsement. The theory pathologises no chosen support; it exposes the equivocation by which self-erasure has borrowed the prestige of support.

With the floor installed, its metaphysics defended, the layer tabulated, the bottom row shown irreducible, and the hardest case turned, the wrong has its locus and its place in

the order of injustices. What it does not yet have is a definition exact enough to border it from its neighbours, a criterion able to detect it, a justice answering it, and a ground making that justice owed. To the definition the next section turns.

9.3. Definition and Conceptual Demarcation

The descent of §9.2 cleared a place beneath the established injustices and named its register ontological. This section fills the place with a concept exact enough to be defended—which means exact enough to be *bordered*, for a new category earns its keep not by the ground it claims but by the lines it holds against the neighbours that would absorb it. A category of injustice that blurred into exploitation, into the freezing of power, into the constitutive injustice it descends from, or into mere maldistribution would be a redundancy however vividly named. The section therefore states the definition clause by clause, then walks the four borders along which confusion threatens, showing at each that the line is principled and not stipulative. At two of these borders the most developed rival theories—the Marxian and Roemerian analyses of exploitation, the capability analyses of Sen and Nussbaum—press hardest, and the section meets them there rather than gesturing past them.

9.3.1 The definition

Generative effacement. *Generative effacement* is the injustice in which, within a field of co-generation, one party's generative activity occupies the shared generative space in such a way that the other loses the possibility of continuing to constitute herself as a generative being—so that what is harmed is not her holdings, her standing, or her knowability, but her being itself, *qua* generative being.

Each clause is load-bearing, and the definition is read by weighing them in turn. *Within a field of co-generation*: the wrong presupposes the relational ontology in which value is

generated between the parties rather than held by either, and is possible only because the generative space is *shared*—were each generating in isolation, one party’s productivity could not occupy the other’s room, there being no common room to occupy. *One party’s generative activity occupies the shared space*: the agent of harm is not a vice but an activity, and a good one; the verb is *occupies*, not *seizes*, because the stronger pole does not remove something the weaker had but fills, by its own generating, the space in which the weaker’s generating would have occurred. *The other loses the possibility of continuing to constitute herself*: the injury is the foreclosure of an ongoing activity, marked by *continuing*—the subject is already constituted and what is lost is the continuation in which her being consists. *What is harmed is her being itself, qua generative being*: the qualifier is exact; the claim is not that she ceases to exist in every sense—she persists biologically, socially, legally—but that she ceases, within the relation, to exist as a generative being, the mode of existence the series holds to be at stake in intimate life.

9.3.2 First border: against exploitation

The most tempting reduction, and the one with the most powerful theory behind it, is to exploitation. The temptation is strong because from outside the two look identical: in both, one party flourishes while another does not. The reduction nonetheless fails, and tracing why against the major accounts of exploitation shows the failure to be structural rather than a matter of emphasis.

On the classical Marxian account, exploitation is the appropriation of the surplus the worker produces above what is returned to her; its mechanism is a *division* of her product into a part she retains and a part the other takes. Roemer, dispensing with the labour theory of value, recasts exploitation in terms of property relations: a coalition is exploited if it would be better off withdrawing with its per-capita share of society’s alienable assets (Roemer 1982); and Vrousalis, pressing past Roemer’s distributive reduction, grounds the complaint in a Non-Servitude Proviso violated by the power-induced extraction of another’s labour (Vrousalis 2021). These accounts differ sharply over what exploitation *is*—surplus-extraction, unequal asset-withdrawal, servitude—but they share, without exception, a structural presupposition that effacement violates: *exploitation requires the exploited party to keep producing*. It is her continued production, appropriated or extracted or coerced, that the exploiter lives upon; an exploitation that stopped its victim’s

production would abolish its own source. The serf must work the lord's demesne; the worker must labour the surplus hours; the servant must serve. Exploitation is parasitic upon an ongoing generativity it does not extinguish but feeds on.

Effacement does the reverse. It does not appropriate the other's production; it *forecloses* it. The effaced party is not a producer whose output is siphoned but a would-be producer whose production never occurs, because the space in which it would have occurred is already filled. Where exploitation says, in effect, *keep generating, that I may take it*, effacement says *do not generate, for I have generated in your place*. The contrast is exact and it is total: the exploited subject is kept generating and robbed; the effaced subject is not robbed but stilled. Vrousalis's proviso sharpens the point rather than dissolving it—effacement is not servitude, for the effaced party is set to no task; she is set to no task at all, which is precisely the harm.

Exploitation feeds on generation; effacement forecloses it. Exploitation and effacement are not variants but structural opposites. Every developed account of exploitation—Marxian surplus-extraction, Roemerian asset-withdrawal, Vrousalis's servitude—presupposes that the wronged party *continues to generate*, since it is her continued generation that is appropriated, extracted, or coerced. Effacement presupposes the contrary: that the wronged party's generation has been *foreclosed*, the space of it pre-filled. One cannot exploit a subject one has effaced, for there is nothing left to appropriate; one cannot efface a subject one exploits, for one needs her producing. The border is the difference between living on another's generativity and extinguishing it.

9.3.3 Second border: against the freezing of power

The second border separates effacement from the solidification of an asymmetry into a fixed, unbalanceable order—the freezing of power. The freezing presupposes a dynamic that is then arrested: two parties exercise power upon one another, and the wrong is that the play between them ossifies into permanent settlement. Effacement is prior to this. It

does not freeze an existing dynamic between two generating poles; it forecloses the second pole's generation before any dynamic between equals can form. The frozen relation still has two agents, locked against each other; the effaced relation has, generatively, one, the other having been pre-empted out of the play entirely. The freezing of power is a pathology of an ongoing contest; effacement is the absence of the contestant. A relation can be both—a frozen power-order can also efface—but the concepts come apart: one can freeze without effacing (two agents permanently locked, both still generating within their fixed positions) and efface without freezing (a fluid, loving, unfixed relation in which one pole simply never generates).

9.3.4 Third border: against constitutive injustice

The third border is the most delicate, because effacement descends from constitutive injustice and shares its ontological reach. The line, drawn in §9.2.3, is restated here as a border: constitutive injustice wrongs the subject at the *threshold of formation*, denying the not-yet-subject her arrival; effacement wrongs the *already-formed* subject, extinguishing the activity in which her achieved being consists. They are kin—both ontological, both deeper than distribution, recognition, or epistemic standing—but they fall on opposite sides of the moment of formation. The constitutive wrong concerns whether a subject will come to be; the effacing wrong, whether an existing subject will continue to be. One bars the door to one who has not entered; the other empties the room of one already inside. The kinship is what makes the border worth drawing: without it, effacement collapses upward into its parent and forfeits its distinctness as a wrong done to maturity rather than to formation.

9.3.5 Fourth border: against distributive injustice and the capability turn

The fourth border is the plainest to state and the most insistently tempting in practice, because effacement so naturally invites description as the effaced party's having received *too little*. But “too little” is distributive language, and it misdescribes the harm—and here the capability theorists must be met, for they offer the subtlest version of the distributive reduction and the one that comes nearest the truth.

Sen and Nussbaum, dissatisfied with distributions of resources, relocate justice's concern

to *capabilities*: what a person is actually able to do and to be, the real freedoms she enjoys to achieve functionings she has reason to value (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000a). This is a genuine advance toward the harm, for it shifts attention from holdings to doings, and effacement is a harm of foreclosed *doing*. One might think the capability approach already names it: is the effaced party not simply a person whose capability to generate has been removed? The answer marks the border precisely. The capability approach treats capabilities as goods to be *secured* for a person—distributed, protected, enabled by institutions—and so remains, for all its advance, within the paradigm of provision: justice ensures she *has* the capability. But effacement is not the absence of a capability the effaced party lacks and should be given; she retains every capability, in full. What is foreclosed is not her capability to generate but her *generating*—the exercise, not the capacity. And the exercise is not a good that can be secured for her, because it is not a good she can be *given* at all: to hand her generation, ready-made, is precisely to confirm its foreclosure, since what arrives is the stronger pole's generation and not hers. The capability approach can secure that she is *able* to generate; it has no resources to ensure that she *does*, for the doing is hers alone and cannot be provisioned. This is the exact sense in which the harm is of being and not of having: distribution and capability alike concern what can be allotted to a subject, and the effaced subject's loss is of an activity that, by its nature, no allotment reaches.

Being, not having; exercise, not capacity. Effacement is irreducible to maldistribution, including its most refined form, the deprivation of capability. The distributive paradigm, even when it advances from resources to capabilities, concerns what can be *secured for* a subject—holdings, functionings, real freedoms. Effacement forecloses not a capability the subject lacks but the *exercise* of capabilities she fully retains; and an exercise cannot be secured for her, since to supply her generation ready-made is to confirm the foreclosure rather than repair it. The border between distribution and effacement is the border between having and being, and, within doing, between the capacity that can be provisioned and the exercise that cannot.

9.3.6 The fixed point for what follows

With the concept defined and its four borders held, the paper's remaining work is fixed, and the definition is the fixed point against which each later part is measured. §9.4 must give a criterion that detects *this* harm—the foreclosure of the weaker pole's own generative continuation—in the very cases where the four shallower diagnoses report nothing; a criterion detecting anything else would detect the wrong thing. §9.5 must derive the justice that repairs *this* harm; a justice repairing anything else would repair the wrong thing. And §9.6 must ground an obligation to cease *this* occupation; an ethics grounding anything else would ground the wrong obligation. Everything that follows is the working-out of the harm bordered here.

9.4. The Formal Criterion: Phase Capture and the Loss of One's Own Frequency

The harm named in §9.3 is invisible to every metric the prior literature supplies. A distributive metric records that one party holds less; here the difficulty is that aggregate value is *rising*. A recognitive metric records that one party is misrecognised; here she may be fully and warmly recognised. An epistemic metric records that one party cannot be heard; here she is heard and thanked. What is required is a criterion that registers a harm consistent with rising value, sincere recognition, and full audibility—a criterion not of holdings, status, or intelligibility, but of whether the other still generates *as herself*. This section constructs such a criterion and shows that it is not a gradient shading imperceptibly out of health but a *phase boundary* that can be located exactly.

9.4.1 Two independent dimensions

A single distinction organises the chapter. The *topology of coupling*—how two generating subjects coordinate—and the *survival of generation*—whether each still generates at its own rhythm—are independent axes. The series' coupling typology classifies the first; the criterion of this paper concerns the second. The standard error, which the section exists to forestall, is to read a strong and harmonious coupling as evidence of health. Coupling can be strong, harmonious, and mutually willed, and the weaker party can nonetheless

have ceased to generate as herself.

The coupling typology gives four regimes, by whether the two subjects pursue the same or different goals and whether their coupling is high or low—with high-dynamical-diversity: (1) same goal, high coupling—a joint sprint, force possibly unequal; (2) same goal, low coupling and high diversity—complementary work on one complex problem; (3) different goals, high coupling—a parallel sprint; (4) different goals, low coupling and high diversity—complementary parallel work on many problems. These four are regimes of *health*: in each, both poles retain a non-zero generative rhythm. *Effacement is not a fifth regime*. It is the common degenerate limit into which any of the four can collapse when one pole loses its own rhythm—and, as the model shows, the collapse is governed not by which regime one is in but by two quantities that cut across all four.

9.4.2 The model

Represent each subject as a phase oscillator—the minimal model of a system with its own intrinsic rhythm of generation. Let θ_w and θ_s be the phases of the weaker and stronger pole, with intrinsic frequencies ω_w and ω_s , the rate at which each, left alone, generates. The stronger pole is the one with the higher intrinsic frequency, $\omega_s > \omega_w$: it generates faster.

Two parameters describe their relation. The *coupling strength* K measures how strongly each pole's state is pulled toward concordance with the other. The *force asymmetry* $\Delta \in [0, 1]$ measures the directedness of that pull: the traction exerted *on* the weaker pole is $K(1 + \Delta)$, that on the stronger $K(1 - \Delta)$. At $\Delta = 0$ the coupling is symmetric; as $\Delta \rightarrow 1$ the weaker pole is fully subject to the stronger while the stronger evolves freely. The dynamics are

$$\dot{\theta}_w = \omega_w + K(1 + \Delta) \sin(\theta_s - \theta_w), \quad (9.1)$$

$$\dot{\theta}_s = \omega_s + K(1 - \Delta) \sin(\theta_w - \theta_s). \quad (9.2)$$

The phase difference $\varphi = \theta_w - \theta_s$ obeys an Adler equation,

$$\dot{\varphi} = (\omega_w - \omega_s) - 2K \sin \varphi, \quad (9.3)$$

whose behaviour gives the criterion directly.¹

9.4.3 The order parameter and the criterion

The criterion must measure not how *much* the weaker pole generates but whether what it generates is *its own*. The order parameter is therefore the degree to which the weaker pole's realised rate departs from its own intrinsic frequency and is drawn toward the stronger's:

$$E = \frac{\dot{\theta}_w^{\text{realised}} - \omega_w}{\omega_s - \omega_w}, \quad E \in [0, 1]. \quad (9.4)$$

$E = 0$ means the weaker pole advances at its own frequency—it generates as itself. $E = 1$ means its realised rhythm has been pulled entirely onto the stronger's frequency—it is in motion, but the motion is the echo of another's rhythm, not its own generation.

Effacement as the loss of one's own frequency. Generative effacement is not the cessation of a subject's activity but the replacement of its own generative rhythm by another's. The effaced pole still moves; an outside observer sees a harmonious, active, synchronised pair. What the observer cannot see, and the order parameter E can, is that one of the two rhythms has gone silent and been overwritten by a copy of the other. This is why the harm is consistent with rising value and reported harmony: the motion, and the value it produces, are real—only they are no longer *hers*.

9.4.4 The result: two distinct structures

Integrating the model across the (K, Δ) plane (Figure 9.1) yields a result sharper than a gradient of risk, and the sharpness is the section's main technical claim. *Two distinct structures govern the harm, and they must not be conflated.*

¹The reduction to a single Adler equation (9.3) follows because the two traction terms, $K(1 + \Delta)$ and $K(1 - \Delta)$, enter $\dot{\varphi}$ additively and sum to $2K$ independently of Δ . Thus Δ drops out of the *locking condition* and survives only in the location of the locked frequency—the formal root of the two-structure result of §9.4.4. On the Kuramoto reduction generally see Kuramoto (1984).

First, whether effacement occurs at all is governed by K alone. Equation (9.3) locks—the weaker pole loses its own frequency—if and only if

$$K \geq K_{\text{lock}} = \frac{|\omega_s - \omega_w|}{2}. \quad (9.5)$$

This is a genuine phase transition with an exact threshold, and it is *independent of Δ* . Below K_{lock} the weaker pole keeps its own rhythm however asymmetric the coupling; above it, the weaker pole is captured. The boundary is the vertical dashed line in Figure 9.1. To its left lies the *autonomous regime*; to its right, the *collapse region*.

Second, once capture has occurred, how deeply the weaker pole is effaced is governed by Δ . In the locked state the common frequency is the traction-weighted mean of the two intrinsic frequencies, and the normalised effacement is

$$E = \frac{1 + \Delta}{2}. \quad (9.6)$$

This is the vertical gradient within the collapse region: at fixed super-threshold K , the harm deepens monotonically with force asymmetry, from $E = \frac{1}{2}$ at $\Delta = 0$ to $E \rightarrow 1$ as $\Delta \rightarrow 1$.

Equal power does not protect the weaker pole. Set $\Delta = 0$ —perfectly symmetric, equal-force coupling, the very picture of a balanced union—and read along the bottom edge of Figure 9.1. Effacement is still $E = \frac{1}{2}$ for every K above threshold. As long as the two subjects have different intrinsic rhythms and the coupling is strong enough to lock them, the slower is drawn off its own frequency by half the gap, *regardless of any equality of power*. Force asymmetry Δ decides only *which* pole is sacrificed more and *how far*; it is coupling strength K , not inequality of force, that decides *whether* a pole is sacrificed at all. The harm is, in the first instance, a property of strong coupling between unlike rhythms—not of unequal power.

9.4.5 Three readings of one degeneration

The same transition can be read in the three idioms the series has already built, which is the warrant for treating it as one phenomenon rather than an analogy.

Predictive coding (Huang 2026; Wanhong 2026a). The stronger pole, generating and pre-arranging faster, pre-symbolises the shared future, driving the weaker pole's prediction error toward zero. Active inference—the generation of new value—feeds on unresolved uncertainty; with the future pre-determined, the fuel is gone. Phase capture is, in this idiom, the foreclosure of the weaker pole's predictive horizon. This extends Paper XVII's claim (Wanhong 2026b) that desire withholds itself from total symbolisation in order to remain alive: here one subject's over-symbolisation extinguishes another's.

Holonomy (Huang 2025; Wanhong 2026a). Above threshold the system's aggregate holonomy is positive—value genuinely accumulates—while the captured pole's own phase advance, measured against its intrinsic frequency, has collapsed. This is the *single-subject spiral*: a system ascending on one pole's rhythm alone. It is the limiting case of Paper XI's justice-as-skewness, the skew carried to the point where one distribution has lost its variance entirely.

Coupling (the present contribution): phase capture above K_{lock} , with depth set by Δ , as derived above.

9.4.6 The inversion

The result overturns the common identification of intimacy with strong coupling and of strong coupling with good. Strong coupling presents itself as union—*we move as one*—and it is precisely strong coupling that, between unlike rhythms, captures the weaker pole and silences its frequency. Low coupling with high dynamical diversity presents itself as distance, and it is precisely what lets two unlike rhythms each survive.

The inversion of the intimacy criterion. The good of intimacy is not the strength of the coupling but whether the coupling leaves each pole turning at its own frequency.

This is the same law Paper XVII reached from another direction in identifying perfect concordance with equilibrium and equilibrium with death: a relation at perfect, frictionless agreement is one in which one of the two rhythms has stopped. High coupling is not the measure of love but, between unlike rhythms, its most common solvent.

9.4.7 The criterion stated, and its handoff to justice

The formal criterion of generative effacement is therefore: **a co-generative relation effaces its weaker pole when its coupling exceeds the locking threshold K_{lock} , drawing that pole off its own intrinsic frequency; the depth of effacement is $(1+\Delta)/2$.** The criterion is satisfiable, and is in fact at its most dangerous, when aggregate value rises and both parties report harmony—exactly the case §9.4.1 required it to catch.

This hands §9.5 a justice with a precise operational meaning. If the harm is crossing K_{lock} , the remedy is to return below it: to lower the coupling until the weaker pole recovers its own frequency. Crucially, the threshold (9.5) depends on K , not on the stronger pole's frequency ω_s . The stronger pole need not slow its own generation—lowering ω_s is neither necessary nor, by itself, sufficient. What restores the weaker pole is lowering K : releasing the traction, not reducing the speed. That distinction, derived here, is the whole content of the claim in §9.5 that the justice of reticence is *decoupling, not deceleration*.

9.5. The Reservation of Generative Space

The criterion of §9.4 located the harm and, in locating it, already pointed past itself to the remedy. If effacement is the capture of the weaker pole above a coupling threshold, then the form of its repair is fixed in advance: not the addition of anything to the weaker pole, but the withdrawal of something from the stronger. This section develops that withdrawal into a positive concept of justice—and the concept is strange enough that it must be stated against the grain of almost everything justice has meant. For the whole tradition of distributive and recognitive justice answers the question *what does one owe the other*; and its answers are additive—a share, a recognition, a hearing, a right. The

justice this paper requires is subtractive. What one owes the effaced other is not a thing given but a determination *withheld*: the room in which she can generate, which exists only where the stronger pole has declined to generate in her stead.

9.5.1 Justice as non-determination

The object that effacement damages is not a holding but an activity—the weaker pole’s continuing generation of value at its own frequency. One cannot repair a damaged activity by transfer, because the activity is precisely what cannot be transferred: to hand the weaker pole a portion of the value one has generated for her is not to restore her generativity but to confirm its suspension, since the value arrives already made, with her contribution already supplied by another. The only repair adequate to the harm is to return to her the *occasion* of generating—and the occasion is a region of the shared field that the stronger pole, simply, does not occupy.

Generative reticence. The justice answering generative effacement is not the transfer of a due share but the *non-determination* of the domain in which the other generates. Its content is a negative and structural obligation: that a generative subject refrain, in the regions where the other’s generativity would otherwise unfold, from determining what is to be generated there. We call this obligation **generative reticence**. It is the determinate negation of effacement—where effacement is the foreclosure of the weaker pole’s generative domain, reticence is the deliberate non-foreclosure of that domain—and it is owed not because the other has been given too little but because she has been left too little room.

The object whose limitation reticence demands is, on its face, the strangest feature of the account, and the surest sign that the harm is real. For the object to be limited is not malice, possessiveness, or any vice—it is *good, fast generation itself*. The stronger pole effaces not by failing the relation but by serving it too completely; reticence asks it to serve less completely, to leave undone things it could do well, for no other reason

than that the other might do them. No theory built to restrain wrongdoing reaches this, because here the thing to be restrained is not wrongdoing but excellence. The justice of reticence is the justice of a good that must, in the presence of another generative being, hold part of itself back.

9.5.2 Decoupling, not deceleration

Everything turns on a distinction the criterion of §9.4 makes exact, and which separates reticence from the moralised self-diminishment it is too easily mistaken for. The threshold at which the weaker pole is captured, $K_{\text{lock}} = |\omega_s - \omega_w|/2$, depends on the *coupling* K and on the difference of intrinsic frequencies—it does *not* depend on the stronger pole’s frequency ω_s taken alone. This has a consequence that is easy to state and decisive in practice: *the stronger pole cannot repair effacement by slowing down.*

Consider the two interventions available to the stronger pole. It may lower its own frequency ω_s —generate more slowly, do less, dim itself—or it may lower the coupling K —release the traction by which its rhythm is transmitted to the other. Lowering ω_s narrows the frequency gap and so does, in the limit, lower the threshold; but it does not return the weaker pole to its own frequency, and it carries a second harm of its own. A stronger pole that decelerates is still the pole that sets the pace; “I have slowed for you” is still a determination of the shared tempo by one party, and it arrives freighted—as every recipient of a sacrifice knows—with the silent debt of having been the cause of another’s diminishment. Deceleration keeps the stronger pole at the centre of the relation’s dynamics, now as benefactor rather than as engine; the weaker pole, far from recovering her own rhythm, acquires a new reason to suppress it, lest she squander what was given up for her. Deceleration is effacement continued by other means.

Lowering K is categorically different. To release the coupling is not to generate less but to generate *without entraining*—to let one’s own rhythm run at its own frequency while ceasing to transmit it as a force that overwrites the other’s. Below K_{lock} the two poles desynchronise: each turns at its own frequency, the weaker pole’s generation is once more its own, and—this is the point—the stronger pole has surrendered nothing of its own speed. It generates as fast and as richly as before; it has only stopped *pulling*.

Decoupling, not deceleration. The remedy for effacement is to lower the coupling K , not the stronger pole's frequency ω_s . Because the locking threshold is independent of ω_s , deceleration does not restore the weaker pole's own frequency and adds the second harm of a sacrifice owed; decoupling restores it and costs the stronger pole nothing of its own generation. Reticence is therefore *not* self-diminishment. A subject may generate as fast and as fully as it is able, provided it does not entrain the other—provided, that is, that it releases the traction rather than reducing the speed.

This is the formal vindication of an intuition that, stated without the model, sounds either trivial or false: that the answer to one partner's overshadowing of another is not for the first to become smaller. The model shows why the intuition is right and what it really asks. It does not ask the strong to be weak. It asks the strong to stop *transmitting* their strength as a force that captures—to decouple their own flourishing from the determination of the other's.

9.5.3 The three channels of determination

Decoupling is abstract until one asks *through what* the stronger pole transmits its traction. The coupling K is not a single wire but a bundle of channels, each a concrete way in which one subject pre-determines the other's next state; to lower K is to relinquish determination in one or more of them. Three channels carry most of the load, and they are ordered by depth—each prior one a precondition of release in the next.

The first channel: the shared telos

The first determination—first in the order of depth set out below—is of *where the relation is going*. When the goal of the shared life—its destination, its project, the shape of the future it is building toward—is generated by one pole, the other can at most find a place *inside* a teleology she had no part in constituting. Her generativity, however vigorous, then runs only within bounds another has drawn; she is free to move, but not to have

said where. This is the channel the four-quadrant typology of §9.4.1 cannot see, for that typology presupposes a goal already given and asks only how two subjects coordinate *toward* it. The prior and graver effacement is the *pre-generation of the goal itself*, which fixes the manifold on which all subsequent coordination occurs. Relinquishment here is the return of the telos to an undetermined, jointly legislated state: not “here is where we are going, and here is your part in it,” but the leaving-open of the destination as a thing the two are to constitute together, including the real possibility that her constitution of it diverges from his.

The second channel: meaning

A subject of great expressive facility—fluent in symbols, quick to interpret, prolific in the conferral of significance—may determine not only where the relation goes but *what its events mean*. Where one pole names every shared occasion before the other has found her own reading, fixes the significance of each passage, supplies the relation with its standing interpretation, the other is left no room to determine meaning, only to receive it. The channel is subtle because the determination feels like a gift: the meanings offered are often beautiful, and refusing to impose them can feel like withholding care. But a meaning supplied is a meaning the other did not make, and a relation whose entire significance is authored by one pole has, in the register of sense, only one generative subject. Relinquishment is the leaving-underdetermined of meaning—the discipline of *not* naming first, of letting events stand uninterpreted long enough that the other’s reading can form, and of accepting that reading when it comes even where it is plainer, or stranger, than the one that went unspoken.

The third channel: the constitution of the problems

The subtlest channel, and the one whose relinquishment is most often confused with self-incapacitation, concerns not what is generated but *which problems the relation is constituted to solve*. A pole made anxious by its own completeness may suppose that the way to make room for the other is to become, deliberately, less capable—to feign a need, to manufacture a dependency, to do badly what it could do well. This is false reticence, and the criterion shows why: a manufactured gap is a determination of the other’s domain in disguise, a problem set for her by the stronger pole rather than a region genuinely left

to her. The correct diagnosis is not that the stronger pole is too capable but that *the shared field has been constituted only on the terrain where its capabilities are strongest*. The other does not lack ability; the relation lacks problems of the kind at which *her* dynamics run fastest. Relinquishment here is the reconstitution of the shared field to include the terrain on which the other's intrinsic frequency is highest—and then the harder discipline of letting her judgement *lead* on that terrain, with the stronger pole's contribution running downstream of hers rather than framing it in advance.

The incompleteness must be real. The third channel is relinquished not by the stronger pole pretending to an incompleteness it does not have, but by the relation being constituted around an incompleteness that is genuine: a domain in which the other's contribution is not substitutable by the stronger pole's, because it is the other who is, there, the faster generator. A staged incompleteness is effacement in the costume of reticence—the stronger pole still authors the problem, merely assigning itself the part of the one in need. Only a real incompleteness, in which the relation would in fact be poorer without precisely her generation, returns to the other a domain that is hers.

9.5.4 Reticence distinguished from sacrifice

It remains to forestall the reduction of the whole account to a counsel of sacrifice—as though reticence were simply the stronger pole giving things up for the weaker, a generosity dressed in formal clothes. Across the three channels, the through-line is the opposite. None of the relinquishments requires the stronger pole to generate less, to be smaller, or to surrender any of its own activity. Each relinquishes a *determining function*—the setting of the goal, the fixing of meaning, the constitution of the problems—that the stronger pole had been exercising *unilaterally*, over a domain the other was in fact better placed to determine. To relinquish a determining function one had no title to monopolise is not to sacrifice; it is to stop overreaching. The stronger pole loses nothing that was properly its own. It keeps its full frequency, its full generative power, its whole self; it

gives up only the traction by which that self had been overwriting another. Reticence is the withdrawal of an overreach, not the surrender of a good—and this is the final sense in which it is decoupling and not deceleration, non-determination and not loss.

9.6. The Ethics of Reticence

The criterion of §9.4 establishes that effacement is a harm; the construction of §9.5 establishes what reticence is and how it repairs the harm. Neither yet establishes that reticence is *owed*—that non-determination is a requirement of justice and not a mere kindness, an aesthetic preference for relations in which both flourish. This section supplies the ground. It moves first negatively, showing that each major ethical framework registers something of the wrong yet, pressed to ground the obligation, fails at a diagnostic point of its own; then positively, locating the ground in the standing of the other as a generative being; and finally reflexively, establishing the constraint that forbids the ethic its own paternalistic application. The negative movement is not a survey but a series of defeats, and the most instructive defeat is care ethics', because care ethics comes nearest and fails most revealingly.

9.6.1 Four frameworks, four failures

Consequentialism cannot see the harm. An ethic evaluating by outcomes is structurally blind here, for the outcomes of effacement are in aggregate good: value rises, the relation prospers, both may report contentment. A framework that sums welfare cannot find a harm invisible in the sum, and effacement is such a harm, since what it destroys—the weaker pole's own generativity—is replaced in the ledger by the stronger pole's surplus, leaving the total undiminished. This is not a marginal failure of detail but the sharpest demonstration that the wrong is non-aggregative.

Contractualism is defeated by consent. An ethic locating wrong in what could not be justified to, or was not agreed by, the other founders on the datum of §9.1.3: the effaced party consents, endorses, is grateful, would choose it again. Contractualism can condemn a determination imposed over objection; it has nothing to say of one the other welcomes. Yet the harm is present in the welcoming case, because consent operates at the level of the will and effacement at the level of being. A wrong surviving the genuine consent of

the one wronged lies outside the reach of any ethic that makes consent its criterion.

Kantian respect locates the wrong too high. The deontological tradition forbids treating another merely as a means and requires treating her always also as an end—and fixes the end-status in her *rational agency*, her capacity to set and pursue ends. But rational agency survives effacement intact: the effaced party still reasons, still chooses, still wills, and often wills her own effacement. An ethic that secures her standing as a rational chooser secures exactly what effacement leaves untouched. The Kantian framework is not wrong; it aims at the right relation (treating-as-end) but at the wrong faculty, and so passes over the harm. (The correction—relocating the end-status from rational to generative agency—is the work of §9.6.2 below.)

Care ethics supplies the ontology and valorises the harm. Of the four, care ethics alone begins from the relational ontology this paper requires: it knows selves are constituted in and sustained by relation, and attends to dependency and to the labour of maintenance the other frameworks overlook. Noddings builds the ethical relation from the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” and makes its central act *engrossment*—the one-caring’s apprehension of the other’s reality, the displacement of her own motives to act on the other’s behalf (Noddings 1984). Here, if anywhere, an ethic should catch a harm done through devotion. Instead care ethics, in its received form, *valorises* the very structure that effaces. For engrossment and motivational displacement, raised to the paradigm of the ethical, describe with precision the inner life of the effacing pole: the one who displaces her own generativity into the other’s, who is engrossed in the other to the point of generating only for and as the other. The standing feminist critique of care ethics already saw the danger from the side of the carer—that the ethic celebrates self-sacrifice and risks the caregiver’s exploitation, pressing her toward a caring that forgets her own needs. This paper locates the symmetrical danger on the other side: that the *cared-for* can be effaced by an engrossment too complete, generated-for so thoroughly that she ceases to generate. Care ethics supplies the indispensable relational ontology, and must be corrected at exactly the point where it makes a virtue of the unstinting giving that, past a threshold the criterion of §9.4 makes exact, occupies the other out of her own being.

Why the frameworks fail. Each major framework fails to ground the obligation of reticence at a diagnostic point: consequentialism because the harm is non-aggregative and invisible in the sum; contractualism because the harm survives sincere consent; Kantian respect because it secures the rational agency effacement leaves intact; care ethics because it valorises, as devotion, the engrossment that effaces. The pattern of failure is itself informative. Three frameworks aim too high—at outcomes, at the will, at rational agency—missing a harm that lies beneath outcome, will, and reason, at the level of generative being; and the one framework pitched low enough, care ethics, mistakes the harm for the good. The ground of reticence must therefore be sought at the level the first three overshoot and the fourth misreads.

9.6.2 The positive ground: the standing of the generative being

If reticence is owed, it is owed because the other's standing as a generative being is a good making a direct claim—a claim damaged specifically by the determination of her generative domain, and damaged even when the determination is benevolent and welcomed. The ground has three components, each drawn from a tradition and each corrected where its received form would miss the harm.

The corrected end-formula. Relocate the Kantian end-status from rational to *generative* agency: the other's standing as a being who continually constitutes herself by generating at her own frequency. The formula becomes—act so that you never determine the other's generative domain merely as an extension of your own. To overwrite her frequency with yours, however lovingly, is to treat her generativity as material for your own, making of her generative being a means to the relation's flourishing rather than an end whose exercise the relation exists to sustain. This repairs the defect diagnosed in §9.6.1: the end-formula was aimed at the wrong faculty, and aimed right, it reaches the harm.

The foreclosure of activity. From the tradition that locates a being's good in the *exercise* of its characteristic activity—its *energeia*—rather than in any state or resource, the harm comes into focus as the foreclosure of an activity rather than the withholding of a good. What the effaced party loses is not something she has but something she *does*: the

activity of generating, in which her flourishing consists. A capability account at the level of functioning catches part of this, but the harm lies one level deeper than a lost functioning—it is the loss of the self-constituting activity any particular functioning would express. Reticence, in this register, is the virtue that holds open the field of another’s exercise.

The second-personal warrant. To the question *on whose authority* the claim is made, the answer is that the obligation is second-personal—owed to her, from her standpoint, on her own standing to demand it (Darwall 2006). The warrant is not a third-personal fact about the goodness of generativity assessed from outside, but her own, perhaps unexercised, standing to require that her generative domain not be determined for her. This component prepares the constraint of §9.6.4: if the warrant is hers, the remedy cannot be administered over her head without reproducing the wrong.

9.6.3 A duty grounded, a virtue in application

The ground is deontological: reticence is a negative obligation owed in virtue of the other’s standing. But an obligation of this kind cannot be discharged by rule, and the reason lies in the harm’s structure. Effacement arrives through devotion, in the ordinary motions of a loving and capable subject doing well by the relation; it breaks no rule and feels, from inside, like care. One cannot rule-follow one’s way clear of it, because no rule fires—there is no moment the stronger pole can recognise, by rule, as the wrong. What is required instead is a trained *perception*: the cultivated capacity to notice, amid generous and well-meant generation, that one’s own activity has begun to foreclose another’s. The ethic is thus deontological in its ground and virtue-theoretic in its application, and the two are compatible: the obligation is fixed and negative, its *detection* a matter of cultivated sensibility no algorithm supplies. This is not a retreat into vagueness but a recognition of the harm’s phenomenology—a wrong that announces itself by no transgression can be caught only by a perception trained to its signs.

9.6.4 The reflexive limit: reticence without paternalism

The ethic carries a danger of its own making, and must close by disarming it. A stronger pole, having grasped the analysis, may set out to *judge* that the other is effaced and to *act*

to restore her generativity—to manage her back into generation. But to judge another’s effacement on her behalf and take her restoration in hand is itself a determination of her domain: it sets her a project, her own recovery, she did not constitute, effacing her in a second key, now in the name of repair. The danger is not hypothetical; it is the precise form that care ethics’ critics already identified within devotion itself. Goodin’s worry about care—that subsuming individuals into a relationship of “we”-ness risks losing track of the separateness of persons, issuing in a smothering paternalism (Goodin 1985)—names exactly the recursion that threatens here: an ethic of non-determination, applied as management, smothers in the act of rescuing.

The constraint that disarms it follows from the second-personal ground. Reticence is the withdrawal of one’s *own* determining activity, never the management of the other’s. The stronger pole’s obligation extends to vacating the domain it has occupied, and stops there; it does not extend to administering what the other then does with the vacated room, for that administration re-occupies the room in the act of giving it. Where the very question is whether the other is effaced, the only non-effacing route is to return the question to her—to leave her reading of her own generativity undetermined—which is itself an instance of the first channel of §9.5.3, relinquished now at the meta-level.

The reflexive constraint. The ethics of reticence forbids its own paternalistic application. Because the wrong is the determination of another’s generative domain, any attempt to diagnose her effacement and direct her restoration is a further determination and so a further effacement—the smothering that care ethics’ own critics located within devotion. The obligation is therefore strictly to vacate one’s overreach and never to manage the other’s recovery; and where the question is whether she has been effaced, the question must be returned to her, on the second-personal authority that the claim was always hers to make. An ethic of non-determination that determined, on the other’s behalf, that she had been determined would refute itself in the performance.

9.7. Objections and Limits

Four objections press hardest, and the section meets each not to dispose of it cheaply but to let it fix the boundary of the claim. The second, the autonomy objection, is the one on which the paper is most exposed; it receives the fullest treatment, drawing on the literature that has thought longest about wrongs done with the victim's consent.

9.7.1 That it counsels the able to be less

The first objection is the one the construction was built to answer, and it returns for final disposal. If effacement is the harm one party's superior generation does another, does the theory not simply counsel the able to do less—to dim their gifts so that others may shine by comparison? It does not, and the answer is now exact rather than merely intuitive. The criterion of §9.4 is not the *rate* of one party's generation but the *capture* of the other's frequency, and capture is a function of coupling, not of speed: the locking threshold $K_{\text{lock}} = |\omega_s - \omega_w|/2$ binds K , not ω_s . The able party is asked not to generate less but to cease entraining—to release the traction by which its rhythm overwrites another's, while keeping its own rhythm entire. The theory counsels decoupling, not diminishment, and §9.5 showed these to be not merely different but opposed: deceleration keeps the strong pole the pace-setter and adds the second harm of a sacrifice owed, where decoupling restores the other's frequency at no cost to the stronger's own. The objection mistakes a counsel of non-determination for a counsel of self-reduction; the model is precisely what tells them apart.

9.7.2 The autonomy objection

The second objection is the one on which the paper is most exposed, and it neither evades nor softens it. If the effaced party consents to her effacement—endorses it, is grateful for it, would choose it again—then by what right does the theory pronounce her wronged, and pronounce it, apparently, over her own sincere judgement of her own life? To do so seems the very arrogance the paper condemns elsewhere: the substitution of the theorist's verdict for the subject's self-understanding.

The objection cannot be answered by denying its premise, for the premise is true and

the paper has insisted on it: the effaced party often does consent, and her consent is not feigned. It must be answered by showing that consent, here, does not do the exculpatory work the objection asks of it—and the resources for showing this are already developed, in the literature on *adaptive preferences*. Elster named the structure: a “blind psychic process operating behind the back of the person,” by which an agent revises her preferences to fit her diminished opportunities without awareness or control (Elster 1983). Nussbaum gave it ethical weight through cases like Vasanti’s, the woman who came to regard her husband’s abuse as part of a woman’s lot, her preference formed by lifelong habituation to constrained options (Nussbaum 2000b). The lesson the literature draws is precisely the one the autonomy objection overlooks: that a preference can be sincerely held, reflectively endorsed, and *still* fail to exculpate the conditions that formed it, because the endorsement itself may be an artefact of those conditions. The effaced party’s gratitude is consistent with her effacement in exactly this way—a generativity foreclosed long enough comes to feel like a preference satisfied.

But the adaptive-preference literature also carries a warning the paper must heed, and heeding it is what keeps the reply from becoming the arrogance the objection feared. Narayan and others have cautioned against treating women who endorse self-subordinating arrangements as mere “dupes” or “prisoners of patriarchy,” urging that their choices be read, often, as competent bargaining within hard constraints rather than as deformed desire (Narayan 2002). The caution is decisive here, and it is why the paper’s reply has two parts that must be held together. The first: consent does not exculpate, because effacement operates at the level of being and consent at the level of the will, and a will habituated to its own foreclosure can sincerely endorse it. The second, equally firm: that consent does not exculpate gives *no one* licence to override the consenting party, to declare her deceived, or to manage her toward a generativity she has not asked to recover. The wrong is real under consent; *and* the authority over the claim remains hers, by the second-personal ground of §9.6.2 and the reflexive constraint of §9.6.4. The theory thus occupies a position narrower and more disciplined than the objection supposes available: it holds that a wrong can be done with sincere consent, while denying that this holding authorises any intervention over the head of the one who consents. It diagnoses a harm; it does not license a rescue.

Consent does not exculpate, and does not authorise. The autonomy objection is answered by a position with two inseparable halves. *Consent does not exculpate effacement*: as the literature on adaptive preferences establishes, a preference sincerely held and reflectively endorsed may still be an artefact of the very foreclosure it endorses, so that the effaced party's gratitude is consistent with her being wronged. *And the failure of consent to exculpate authorises no intervention*: the second-personal warrant locates the claim's authority in the effaced party herself, so that to override her, or to manage her recovery, would be a fresh effacement. The paper holds both: the wrong survives consent, and no one but the wronged has standing to act on its being a wrong. To collapse either half—to say consent cures the harm, or that the harm licenses rescue—is to leave the narrow ground on which the diagnosis is both true and non-arrogant.

9.7.3 The asymmetry-of-capacity objection

The third objection holds that sometimes one party simply *can* generate more—is more gifted, more practised, better suited to the problems at hand—and asks whether the theory does not then penalise a mere difference of capacity, demanding an artificial equalisation that wrongs the abler party in the name of sparing the other. The reply distinguishes two things the objection runs together: *generating more* and *occupying the domain of the other's generation*. A more capable party may generate a great deal without effacing, provided the relational field is constituted so that the other's own frequency has a domain in which to run; conversely, a less capable party is not effaced by the mere existence of someone abler, but by the foreclosure of the terrain on which her own—perhaps quite different—capability would operate. This is the substance of the third channel of §9.5.3: the remedy for the harm of completeness is not the abler party's self-diminishment but the constitution of the shared field to include the terrain where the other's frequency is highest. Reticence is not the equalisation of capacities and asks no one to feign incapacity; it asks only that the field not be drawn solely around one party's strengths. The difference of capacity is not the harm; the totality of the occupation is.

9.7.4 The limit of the criterion

The fourth is less an objection than a limit the paper imposes on itself, and states plainly to forestall misuse. The formal criterion of §9.4 detects a *structural risk*; it locates the conditions under which effacement occurs. It is not an instrument for the verdict on an actual relation, and still less for the judgement of persons. Real relations are not two oscillators; the model abstracts severely, and its worth is conceptual clarification, not measurement. To read off from it that a given partner stands convicted of effacing another would mistake an illumination for a tribunal—and would, moreover, violate the very constraint of §9.6.4, since to convict on another’s behalf is itself to determine her domain. What the criterion warrants is a cultivated reticence: a sensitised attention to the possibility of the harm, a disposition to look for it where it hides behind devotion. It is a lamp held to a dark region, not a gavel; and a lamp is what a harm this well-concealed requires, for what announces itself by no transgression can be sought only by a perception taught where to look.

9.8. Conclusions and Envoi

This paper has isolated an injustice the theory of justice had not named: a wrong done not to what a subject has, or is taken to be, or can make known, or could come to be, but to her being, in the precise sense of her continuing activity as a generative subject. In the manner of the series, it closes not on a single synthesis but on the several registers in which the finding can be stated—each true, none reducible to the others, their plurality not a hedge but the form a finding takes when it sits at the meeting of an ontology, a formalism, a deontic structure, and an ethic.

9.8.1 The findings, in their registers

Ontologically, the finding is that there is a mode of injustice consisting in the deprivation of being-as-generation. Because, for a relational subject, to be is to go on generating, the foreclosure of its generation is not the loss of one of its activities but the hollowing of its existence; and this can be done to a subject already fully formed, which is what distinguishes it in register from the constitutive injustice it descends from. The theory of justice acquires, with this layer, a floor beneath the floor it had supposed final—and

the descent that reaches it is licensed not by analogy but by the identity of being with generation that the series argues on independent grounds.

Formally, the finding is that effacement is a phase transition with an exact threshold. A subject loses its own frequency when the coupling between two unlike rhythms exceeds a bound fixed by their difference; the depth of the loss is set by the asymmetry of force; and—the result that organises all the rest—the loss occurs even under perfectly equal power. The good of intimacy is thereby shown to lie not in the strength of the bond but in whether it leaves each subject turning at its own frequency, and the long-standing identification of closeness with strength of coupling is exposed as the precise error that lets devotion efface.

Deontically, the finding is that the justice answering this wrong is not additive but subtractive. It is not the transfer of any share, recognition, or hearing, but a negative and structural obligation to refrain from determining the domain in which another generates—an obligation whose content is non-determination and whose discharge is the leaving of room. This is the rarest shape a duty of justice can take: not *give*, but *withhold*; not the completion of the other's world, but the deliberate leaving-incomplete of one's own occupation of it.

Ethically, the finding is that this obligation is owed in virtue of the other's standing as a generative being, on an authority that is hers; that it is detected not by rule but by a cultivated perception, since it is breached through devotion and announces itself by no transgression; and that it forbids, on pain of self-refutation, its own paternalistic enforcement. The ethic is thus doubly disciplined—deontological in ground and virtue-theoretic in application, and reflexively barred from becoming the management of the other it would protect.

The closing thesis. Between two generative beings, justice requires not the transfer of value but the non-foreclosure of the other's capacity to generate. A giving that occupies the whole of the shared space is not the fulfilment of love but the quiet extinction of one of its two subjects; and the love that would keep both subjects in being must therefore

learn a giving that withholds—must leave, within the field it generates, the room in which the other generates too. Justice, on this account, is not what one does for the other but what one leaves undone, that she may do it herself.

Envoi

Two rhythms, unlike in their frequencies, may be brought so close that they beat as one—and in the beating-as-one the slower is not joined but silenced, kept in motion by a measure no longer its own. The bond looks then most like union at the very moment it has become most solitary, one rhythm sounding through two bodies. The whole of this paper has been an argument that the cure for that solitude is not to slow the faster rhythm but to loosen the bond between them, until each, turning again at its own measure, can be near the other without being overtaken by it—close enough that something is generated between them, free enough that it is generated by them both. That is the only nearness in which two generative beings remain two. It is, this paper has argued, the form that justice takes when what is at stake is no longer what we have, nor how we are seen, nor whether we can be heard, but whether, beside each other, we continue to be.

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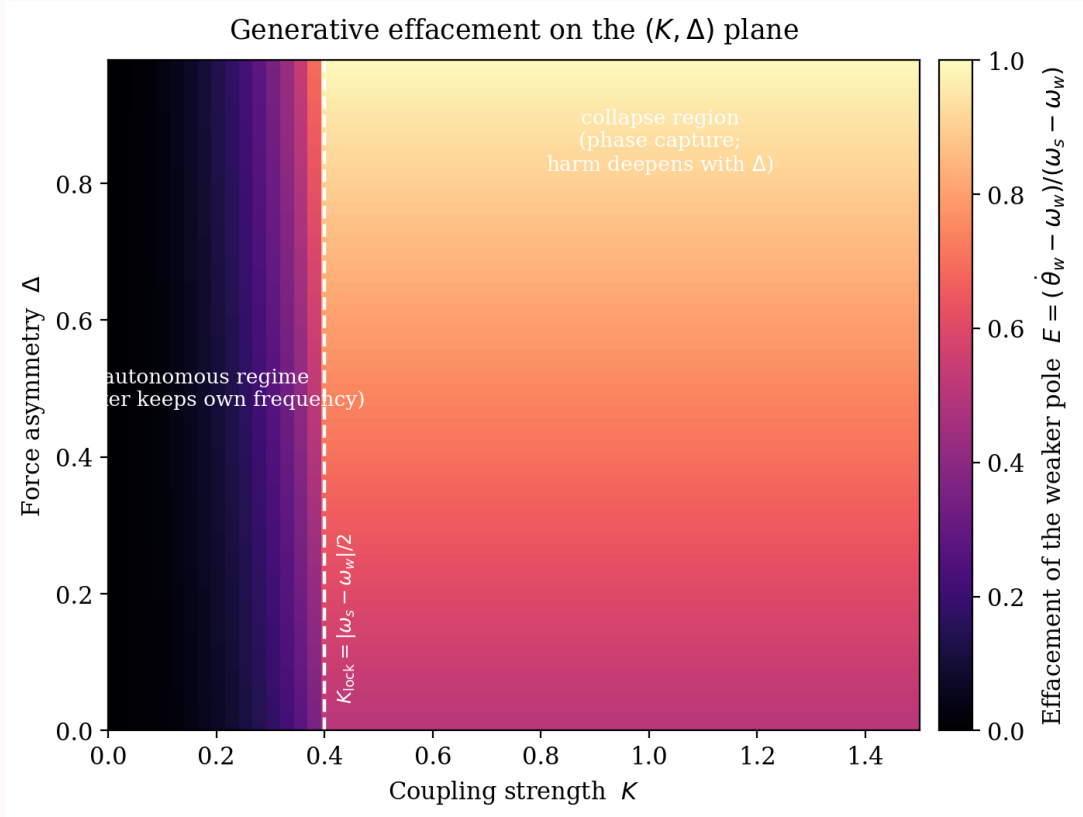


Figure 9.1: Effacement E of the weaker pole on the (K, Δ) plane. Vertical dashed line: the locking threshold $K_{\text{lock}} = |\omega_s - \omega_w|/2$ of (9.5), independent of Δ . *Left*: the autonomous regime—the weaker pole keeps its own frequency ($E = 0$). *Right*: the collapse region—the weaker pole is phase-captured and the harm deepens with Δ by (9.6), reaching $E = 1$ as $\Delta \rightarrow 1$. Note the bottom edge: at $\Delta = 0$ (equal force) effacement is still $E = \frac{1}{2}$ throughout the collapse region. Equal power does not prevent capture.

